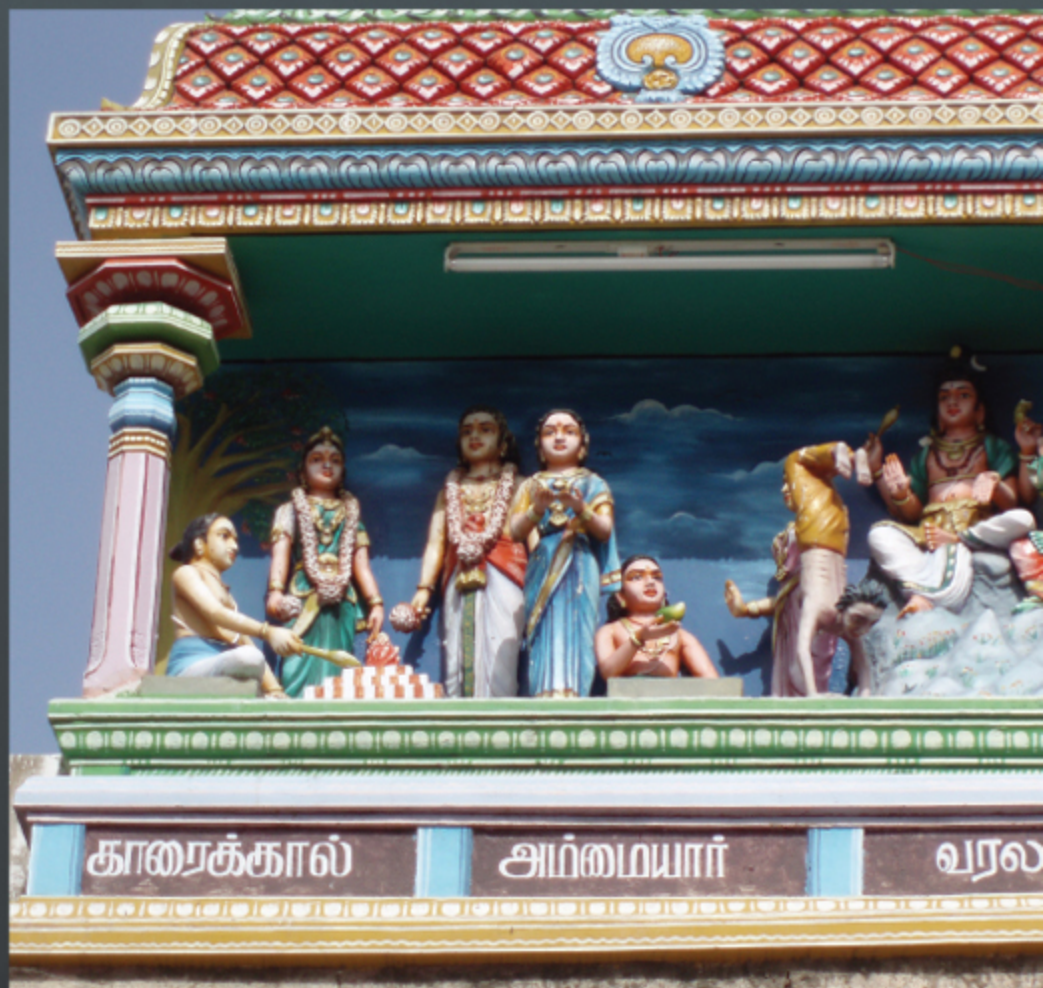


INTERPRETING DEVOTION

The poetry and legacy of a female *bhakti* saint of India



Karen Pechilis

Interpreting Devotion

Devotion is a category of expression in many of the world's religious traditions. This book looks at issues involved in academically interpreting religious devotion, as well as exploring the interpretations of religious devotion made by a sixth-century poet, a twelfth-century biographer, and present-day festivals.

The book focuses on the female poet-saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar, whose poetry is devotional in nature. It discusses the biography written on the poet six centuries after her lifetime, and suggests ways of interpreting Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry without using the categories and events promoted by her biographer, in order to engage her own thoughts as they are communicated through the poetry attributed to her. In the same way that the biographer made the poet "speak" to his present day, the book looks at how festivals held today make both the poetry and the biography relevant to the present day.

By discussing how poetry, story, and festival provide distinctive yet overlapping interpretations of the saint, this book reveals the selections and priorities of interpreters in the making of a living tradition. It is an accessible contribution to students and scholars of religion, Indian history and women's studies.

Karen Pechilis is Professor of Religious Studies and NEH Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Drew University, USA. She is an experienced theorist of devotion and translator of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* hymns and their scholarly interpretation. Her previous books are *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (1999) and *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States* (2004).

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Preface and acknowledgments

This project officially began in 2001. That year, I wrote and submitted my proposal for a project entitled “The Three Lives of a Woman Saint” to the Fulbright organization for the Senior Research Fellowship competition 2001–2002. The proposal described a project in which I would study the female *bhakti* saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ through her poetry, through the medieval canonical hagiographical story about her written by Cēkṃlār, and through present-day festival celebrations in honor of her. I would like to thank the Fulbright organization for accepting my proposal and funding my research trip to India from December 2002 to May 2003 to work on this project. The three “lives,” as I then called them, form the structure for this book, as can be seen from the table of contents.

However, the project unofficially began even longer ago, from 1987, when I began to be intrigued by the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* saints of whom Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ is a celebrated member, through the 1990s as I formalized that research, leading to my dissertation (1993) and first book, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Through those years of research, colleagues in India were very supportive of my interest in the Tamil saints, and I am grateful for their scholarly *satsang* (a Sanskrit term meaning “enlightened company”) and friendship. In three memorable events, they specifically encouraged my interest in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ. In March of 1993, Dr. A. A. Manavalan, then Chair of the Tamil Language and Literature Department at the University of Madras and with whom I was working on a translation of the devotional hymns by the three prominent male saints in Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition (Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar), brought me to the town of Kāraikkāl so that I could visit the shrine to the saint there. This was a wonderful introduction to the saint in her native place. About a month later, Dr. Vai. Irattinācapāpati, then Emeritus Professor of Philosophy from the University of Madras and with whom I was studying Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy as a chapter of my dissertation (and then first book), included me along with a group of philosophy students and devotees on a day trip to Tiruvālaṃkāṭu on the second day of the annual festival there to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ. One of the highlights was that Dr. Irattinācapāpati treated our group to an intriguing lecture on philosophy and the saint while we were there. In March of 1997, I and a group of scholarly friends took a day-long pilgrimage to Tiruvālaṃkāṭu on the second day of the annual festival there to

Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār. This group included Dr. Vaithilingam, a Tamil Icai (music and literature) scholar; his brother Mr. Kotilingam, who is recognized as learned in *Tirumurai* (the canon of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* works) and Dr. K. R. Seethalakshmi, Professor of Music at Queen Mary's College in Chennai. Dr. Seethalakshmi's young daughter, who at only three years old could sing by heart the first hymn of the poet-saint Campantar (which is the first hymn of the entire Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* canon, the *Tirumurai*), *tōṭuṭaiya ceviyaṇ*, delightfully accompanied us. These pilgrimages in the company of these erudite and gracious scholars are cherished memories for me.

My host for academic affiliation during my Fulbright Fellowship was the International Institute of Tamil Studies in Taramani, Chennai, directed by Dr. K. A. Gunasekaran. I thank the Director for that eminent research institution's gracious hospitality, including the use of its excellent library with its diverse holdings that include the Institute's own numerous research publications. At the Institute, I worked with Dr. Annie Thomas, and am grateful to her for sharing her tremendous expertise on classical Tamil prosody with me. I also benefited from the scholarly staff and resources at the Roja Muthiah Research Library, directed by Dr. G. Sundar, now located near to the International Institute of Tamil Studies.

Dr. A. A. Manavalan was my mentor for translating Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār's poetry and Cēkkiḷār's biography; for more than a decade I have benefited from his vast knowledge, both literary and encyclopedic, of classical Tamil literature. On my trips to attend festivals celebrating Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār, I was delighted to be accompanied by my two dear friends, Mrs. S. Manavalan, a knowledgeable and thoughtfully engaged devotee who also contributed ideas to my translations as I discussed them with her husband, and Mrs. Champa Kumar, an accomplished artist in the fields of Tamil and Carnatic classical vocal music and traditional Tanjavur painting. Both their knowledge of Tamil devotional traditions and their friendship have contributed much to this study.

I was pleased to have opportunities to present my research at discussion-based scholarly venues, both colloquia and conferences, consistent with my preference for sharing over singularity, and I have greatly benefited from the scholarly comments I received at these events. I would like to thank Dr. Milind Wakankar for his invitation to present at the State University of New York – Stony Brook's Center for India Studies (March 2004); Dr. David Magier and Dr. Judith Walsh for their invitation to present at the University Seminar on South Asia at Columbia University (October 2004); Dr. T. Vasanthal of the Tamil Department at Ethiraj College in Chennai, who invited me to present a lecture to her students (July 2006); Dr. Wendy Kolmar, convener of the Drew University Faculty Research Series, for her invitation to present (October 2007); and convener Till Luge and the graduate students who invited me to present at the Graduate South Asia Colloquium at the University of Pennsylvania (November 2007). I also benefited greatly from the opportunity to present my research at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting (2004, 2007) and the annual Conference on the Study of Religions of India (2007, 2009).

My present study has also benefited from constructively critical scholarly responses I have received on materials that I published previously. Those responses, plus further research and my completion of my translation of the saint's poetry, have enabled me to revise my published work substantially for this book-length study, and I would like to acknowledge the scholarly publications herewith, all of which have formally granted their permission for my use of these publications in this book. [Chapter 4](#) draws on the prior publication "Chosen Moments: Mediation and Direct Experience in the Life of a Classical Tamil Saint, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, 1 (Spring 2008), 11–31; [Chapter 5](#) draws on the prior publication "Experiencing the Mango Festival as the Ritual Dramatization of Hagiography," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21, 1–2 (2009), 50–65; and [Appendix 2](#) draws on the prior publication "The Story of the Classical Woman Saint, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār: A Translation of Her Story from Cēkkilār's *Periya Purāṇam*," *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 10, 2 (August 2006), 173–86. I completed a nearly final draft of this book-length project in mid-2009.¹

I would also like to thank the people at Routledge who critically reviewed this manuscript and managed its production: Editors Dorothea Schaefer and Leanne Hinves, Series Editor Gavin Flood, Editorial Assistant Jillian Morrison, Project Manager Jessica Stock, Production Editor Lisa Salonen, Copy-editor Sarah Harrison, and two anonymous reviewers.

In addition to the persons I have already mentioned in this preface, I would also like to thank a number of colleagues, in random order (imagine a large round table or Judy Chicago's triangle), for their insightful responses to my work in our delightful conversations: †Selva J. Raj, Yudith Greenberg, Paul Younger, C. S. N. Sachitananda Ganesa Deekshitar, Bill Harman, Corinne Dempsey, Nee-lima Shukla-Bhatt, Brian Pennington, Amy Allocco, †Donald G. Jones, Uma Ramachandran, Carol Anderson, Premila Gurumurthy, Serinity Young, Vasudha Narayanan, Loriliai Biernacki, Uma and Nandan Nilakantha, Nancy Martin, Phyllis Herman, Ranjith and Rani Henry, Chrystal Easdon, Miranda Shaw, George Pati, Chad Bauman, Vishwa Adluri, Julie Pechilis, Jonathan Z. Smith, Sara Henry and Mala Kadar. I also thank students in two of my classes, a graduate seminar on India through Art and Text and an undergraduate seminar on Women in Asian Religions, for their perceptive comments on portions of my manuscript. I also express my thanks to very special students, with whom it has been a pleasure to share this research and receive their discerning responses over several years: Lauren Griffith, Erin Newell, Patrick Robinson, and James Robinson. On a very personal note, I express heartfelt gratitude to my parents, and I dedicate this book to Tom, who entered my life when this project was *in medias res* and became invaluable to its completion.

A note on transliteration

Transliteration of Tamil terms follows the model provided by the *Tamil Lexicon*, published by the University of Madras. In cases where the Sanskrit version of a term is much more widely known than the Tamil, I use the Sanskrit in conventionally established transliteration (e.g., Śiva instead of Civaṇ, *linga* instead of *linkam*). I do not use diacritical marks for very well-known proper names of places (e.g., Kanchipuram).

1 Gestures of interpretation

This is a book about interpreting religious devotion. Devotion is a category of expression in many of the world's religious traditions. The term generally conveys a person's profound emotional and mental commitment to a sacred being, which is expressed in conscientious and purposeful activities. In my first book on religious devotion, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, I argued that, given *bhakti*'s emphasis on motivated action, we should understand the term more properly as "participation."¹ As a relationship between the human and the divine that is imagined by humankind, *bhakti* (devotion) is a primary site for the intersection of wonder and self-expression, which stimulates an exquisitely participatory impetus, especially in the arts and letters.

There are four gestures of interpretation in this book, each made by a different agent for different purposes. The one that frames this entire project is my own academic interpretation, the purpose of which is to contribute ideas to the academic community about understanding religious devotion. In this first chapter, I take up issues of the academic interpretation of religious devotion, including gender, history, and language. The other chapters of this book explore the interpretations of religious devotion made by a sixth-century poet, a twelfth-century biographer, and present-day festival publics.

All of the interpreters are linked by their focus on a poet known as Kāraikkāl Ammaiār. She is the centerpiece of this study, without whom it would not have been possible. Kāraikkāl Ammaiār is an important poet from classical Indian tradition. Her poetry is included in a canon; she has been publicly recognized as a saint since the twelfth century; and she is understood today as having initiated new genres of poetic creativity. On the basis of her poetry in the Tamil language, most scholars date her to ca. 550 CE. Her poetry is devotional (*bhakti*) in nature, tracing her distinctive human perspective on the divine, Lord Śiva. She is thus considerably earlier than other Hindu Indian female poets who have become known to English speakers through translations, including Mīrābāī (sixteenth century; Rajasthan), Mahādēviyakka (twelfth century; Karnataka), and Āṇṭāl (tenth century; Tamilnadu).² The unifying thread among these diverse female poets is their promotion of a *bhakti* ("devotion," "participation") perspective, which means that their poetry is religious in nature since it has the primary aim of tracing a relationship between the poet and God. Since their poetry posits a relationship, it both

2 Gestures of interpretation

glorifies God and reveals the poet's own concerns that contextualize her praise of and desire for God. As a classical term, *bhakti* describes the human love for God, and not God's love for humankind; thus, *bhakti* poetry, while it reaches for the divine, is thoroughly grounded in human experience. Chronologically, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār stands at the beginning of Indian traditions of female and male saints who wrote *bhakti* poetry in regional languages.

Some six centuries after her lifetime, a court minister named Cēkkiḷār wrote an authoritative biography about her that formed a chapter in a sizable volume that included biographies of sixty-two other named persons whose devotion to Lord Śiva was deemed exemplary. This biographical text played a major role in establishing these personages as saints in Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition. In the text, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is one of only three named women, and she alone is a female author; six males are also represented as authors.³ These saints' compositions were later collected and placed, along with works by twenty other authors, into a canon of texts in glorification of Śiva, known as the *Tirumurai*, with the biographical volume serving as the twelfth and final book of the canon.

The biographical volume, known as the *Periya Purāṇam* ("Great Traditional Story"), is positioned as the culminating volume of the canon, and its location mirrors its influence in mediating public knowledge of the saints.⁴ The stories are lively, the Tamil in which they are written is graceful, and the volume is a celebrated example of a classical Tamil epic or a "great narrative poem"; for all of these reasons, the text has wide currency in Tamil culture past and present.⁵ In the case of the three major male saint-poets in the tradition, named Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar, their lengthy biographies contextualize their composition and performance of their hymns in pilgrimages across the lands of the state now known as Tamilnadu. This knowledge complements the experience audiences have when they hear their hymns performed at temples today by special temple singers known as *ōṭuvārs*.

In contrast, the biographical story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is well known to Tamils today, but her poetry is not. The two poems by Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār that were traditionally set to music as hymns are only very rarely performed: These are known as *Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam* ("Sacred Decade of Verses on [the place named] Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭu"; there are two decades so entitled). This lack is particularly interesting since it is well known among musicians that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār specifically mentions musical tunes and instruments in one of the verses, and is thus a valuable source, along with the epic *Cilappatikāram* (ca. fifth century) for the history of Tamil classical music. Her other two poems, *Arputat Tiruvantāti* ("Sacred Linked Verses on Wonder") and *Tiruviraṭṭai Maṇimālai* ("Sacred Garland of Double Gems") are also not well known, although the latter in particular represents a new direction for poetic meters.⁶ What we can say is that her poetry is known for these traits to specialists in literature and music; the biographical story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār very much overshadows her own compositions in the public imagination.

A main concern of the first part of this book (Chapters 1 to 3), then, is to suggest ways of interpreting her poetry without using the categories and events promoted

by her biographer, in order to engage her own thoughts as they are communicated through the poetry attributed to her and to foreground her status as a major classical poet of Tamil and Indian tradition. This chapter provides historical, textual, and thematic information about her poems in order to prepare the reader for her or his own encounter with selected poems in the second chapter of this book, and with the entirety of the corpus attributed to the saint in the first appendix to this book. Subsequent chapters of this book will interpret her poems in more thematic detail; analyze Cēkklār's interpretive representation of her in a biography; and consider current interpretations of the saint through biography and ritual at two annual festivals held in her honor in the present day.⁷

This chapter provides context for the interpretations, including translations and discussions, that take place in this book. It is expected that a translator will be knowledgeable on the cultural context of that which she or he is interpreting, and that she or he will share relevant aspects of that cultural context with her or his reader. In the case of this book, this cultural context comprises both historical–religious and scholarly methodological milieus. The historical–religious context has to do with the production of the poems attributed to Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār and their interpretation in Indian tradition. In terms of this historical–religious cultural context, two points are especially important. The first is that knowledge of the history of the period in which Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār composed her poetry is most fully accessible to us through literary sources; thus, this chapter presents the literary history of her era, the sixth century, and the time period preceding it, as well as later texts that explicitly reference the poet or her works. Indeed, the poet herself appears interested in literary history rather than political history. The second point is that Śiva-*bhakti* compositions included in the Śaiva canon (the canon is called the *Tirumurai*) are not accompanied by historical (pre-nineteenth-century) written traditional commentary, as are parallel Viṣṇu-*bhakti* compositions.⁸ The historical traditional commentaries written on Viṣṇu-*bhakti* compositions discussed the diction, meaning, and implications of each poetic verse of a text, often allegorizing the poetry.⁹ Part of my argument here is that, while historical written commentaries such as these do not appear to have been performed on Śiva-*bhakti* compositions such as the poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, this does not mean that her poems were not subject to interpretation; rather, the interpretation of her poems took and continues to take place in other important modes, including medieval biography and present-day festival performances. The biography and festivals serve as a sort of commentary on her poems in the special sense that they interpret the devotional subjectivity the poet represents in her work without a focus on explicating specific verses of her poetry. In the present day, commentaries have been written that discuss each verse of her poems in the traditional style, and I have drawn on these in my translations. While there is no critical edition of the poems attributed to Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, there is a consensus on the number and nature of verses attributed to her in both traditional and scholarly communities. Lastly, in terms of the scholarly methodological context, the important point is that I am writing for an audience who wishes to join me in engaging these poems through critical academic scholarship.

Distinctive interpretive stances

The overall focus of this book is to study selected important moments in the making of a religious tradition over time. The moments that I emphasize – poetry, biography, festival – can all be characterized as public and as explicitly religious in motivation, which distinguishes my selections from other possible ones, such as the representation of the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār in children’s schoolbooks or in film.¹⁰ Significant also is that the poetry and the biography were canonized in the tradition; it is unusual for both the utterance (in this case, the poetry) and the narrative that was subsequently developed around it (in this case, the biography), to be preserved and accessible as two distinctive entities, much less canonized together as in the case of the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition. As Jonathan Z. Smith has shown, interpreters are crucial to the livelihood of tradition, especially if the tradition is canonized, for something that is fixed and unchanging (a canon) needs a mechanism (an interpreter) in order to make it “speak” to the present day.¹¹ Just as the biographer made the poet “speak” to his present day, the festivals held today make both the poetry and the biography “speak” to the present day; thus, Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition affords us an important opportunity to study the nature and significance of interpretive gestures in religious tradition, as this book contributes to making that tradition “speak” to academic study in the present day.

I foreground interpretation in this study because it is the human work of understanding that provides a red thread through the many different versions of the devotion (*bhakti*) of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, from her interpretation of herself and her god Śiva in her poetry, to the author of the biography’s interpretation of her life, to the festivals that interpret the significance of her devotion to Śiva, to my own study that interprets her poetry and subsequent discourses about her (textual and performative) in the past and present as significant for the academic study of religion. Whether or not there was an historical person named Puṇitavaiyār (“the pure one”), as her biographer claims was her birth name, who became a poet known by the saint name Kāraikkāl Ammaiār (“the mother/lady/saint from the town of Kāraikkāl”), is a matter as uncertain as it is for the study of many people who lived in the remote past, since our present-day methods of historicity were certainly not practiced then. It is of special concern in this regard that the poetry attributed to the saint does not mention the biographical details portrayed by her biographer, and thus we do not at present have any corroboration for his representation. With this said, my project studies the representations of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār – poet, saint, patron of place, academic subject – that are prominent in past and present, the existence of which are not a matter of conjecture but are instantiated through poetry, biography, festival, and scholarship.

On one level, there is a commonality between my project and that of the poet, her biographer, and festival publics today: We are all engaged in acts of interpretation, and we create records of our attempts to understand and communicate our understanding, in the various forms of poetry, narrative, performance, and expository writing. Recognizing the similarity of our engagement in understanding and communication – the human work of creating knowledge – is an important

demonstration of our common humanity. The *act* of interpretation – in which the acting subject traces her point of view to others – is common to all.

In practice, to interpret is to self, for selection is primary in interpretation and that act of selection shapes and reveals something about ourselves. An interpretation is composed of “contingent human preferences,” to borrow Bruce Lincoln’s phrase, and it traces “a self-determined history of attention,” to borrow Philip Fisher’s.¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer’s image of “horizons” of meaning, in which the different stances of author and interpreter can overlap in partial “fusion” in hermeneutical (interpretive) understanding, acknowledges both that an interpreter brings her or his own perspective to a text and that the text encodes the author’s meaning; thus, “[u]nderstanding is therefore not merely reproductive, but also productive.”¹³

Acts of interpretation are relational. They involve translation of one’s own ideas and responses in order that they may be accessible to others, and thus shared with others; the impetus is sharing one’s point of view.¹⁴ Both “interpretation” and “translation” have a sense of “spreading” or “crossing” in their etymologies. Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s poetry translates her experience of Śiva for an audience that is presumed by, but left unspecified in, her poetry; Cēkkiḷār’s biography translates her life story in the context of his crystallization of Tamil Śaiva tradition; the festival organizers and celebrants translate the narrative of her life story into a series of rituals in which the public can participate; and my expository study translates these prominent interpretations by and about Kāraikkāl Ammaiār for an English language readership interested in the study of literature and religion. Since interpretation engages expressed thought, it is both an art of respect and an art of negotiation: Interpretation is imbrication.

As individualized as interpretation is, it is also a meaningful generalization that affirms the intelligibility of religious thought and practice (and thought and practice more generally) across differences that can in real and imagined ways create borders, such as subjectivity, history, culture, tradition, and so on.¹⁵ To a great extent, current theories of interpretation have developed in this direction of affirming mutual intelligibility in order to critique the perceived incommensurability of “conceptual relativism,” in which modes of expressed thought are so different as to be mutually unintelligible, and also to critique current scholarly emphasis on the body, which in many ways seems to valorize individuality at the expense of the possibility of a meeting of minds.¹⁶ The work of pragmatic philosopher Donald Davidson in particular is used by prominent theorists in religious studies, especially his philosophy of “radical interpretation,” which is based on several principles that support interpretation as access to another’s expressed thought and as a basis for communication, including “content holism,” which asserts that expressed thought is coherent; “natural history,” which asserts that there is a veracity and causality among “speech, action, and ordinary objects in the world” (thus the “truth-conditional” nature of expressed thought); and “rationality,” which asserts a presumption of the rational basis of meaning.¹⁷

Hans H. Penner has persuasively argued for a new approach to the study of religion based on Davidson’s premises. Penner’s new approach views religions’

common emphasis on “superhuman agents” as both “truth-conditional” and literal, which challenges the dominant 200-year history of the Romantic emphasis on the definition of religion as “symbolic” and non-rational.¹⁸ Significantly, “truth-conditional” does not mean that what is expressed is always true; rather, it points to the principle that communication privileges truth, which serves as the substratum by which an interpreter can judge a speaker’s utterance to be false.¹⁹ A presumption of rational, truthful speech also allows the hearer to interpret what is said as counter-intuitive; in other words, language allows for its own challenge.²⁰ What is expressed is propositional in that it affirms or denies something, encouraging a judgment of true or false by the hearer. Penner’s theory of religion is important for my and other studies in religion because he locates religious utterances as intelligible within common human discourse, which is premised on a speaker meaningfully engaging a hearer, usually employing persuasion (not proof). Thus, religious utterances are able to be understood across time, region, tradition, and other markers of the specific positions of the person who makes the utterance and the person who hears or reads the utterance.

My interpretive gesture is to understand and to characterize the interpretive gestures on the part of the saint, her biographer, and the festival publics. In my view, there are two basic, shared parts to their interpretive gestures. First, they take it as literal and as axiomatic that a “superhuman agent,” the god Śiva, both exists outside of themselves and is their central focus. This main premise is both “truth-conditional” and rational. It is “truth-conditional” insofar as they believe that the existence of Śiva is true. It is rational insofar as what they say about Śiva is both intelligible and accessible to humankind, and insofar as the knowledge they present about Śiva can be challenged (for example, by other sectarian groups). Second, their overall interpretive frame is prescriptive: Their premise is also that the worship of Śiva is understandable to, practicable by, and beneficial for, humanity.

In applying my interpretation, differences between my gesture and those of my subjects of academic study become clear. For example, the aim of my discussion is not to promote a view of the ontology of Śiva; my view is to acknowledge that their discourses view the existence of Śiva as true. That is, I understand that they believe that their statements regarding Śiva are true. The three perspectives of the saint, biographer, and festival publics are both joining and shaping a genealogy of knowledge about Śiva. My study interprets their human work in constituting that knowledge.

The difference between my subjects’ emphasis on the reality of Śiva and my emphasis on tracing their perspectives as a discourse that creates religious tradition can be characterized by a distinction made by another current scholar of religion. In his aptly titled *Relating Religion*, Jonathan Z. Smith contrasts two discourses in the study of religion. Since his schema describes two modes of *studying* religion, it does not exactly characterize the difference between the interpretive gesture of my subjects and my own, but there is enough resonance between Smith’s categories of *presence* and *representation* to translate his schema into this different domain, with *presence* characterizing the perspectives of the poet, her biographer, and festival publics, while *representation* characterizes my own perspective.

An understanding of religion based on *presence* is one that assumes that religion is unique or *sui generis* in terms of both human culture and scholarly study; that religion is “reality”; that language is self-evident and transparent; that the goal of study is to discover a universal principle or idea; and that the method of study “denies the legitimacy of translation, and the cognitive value of difference.” In contrast, an understanding of religion based on *representation* assumes that religion is an interrelated aspect of human culture and an interrelated discipline of scholarly study; that religion is an intellectual category; that language is a cultural construction; that the goal of study is to propose generalizations; and that the method of study is to engage in translation in which the unknown/unfamiliar is critically approached through the known/familiar.²¹

The poet, biographer, and festival publics orient themselves around the presence of Śiva. The language they use, while sophisticated and accomplished (poetry, verse, ritual gesture), promotes the acceptance of Śiva as a unique universal reality. Their interpretive gestures naturalize continuity as “tradition.” In contrast, I take as my project the study of representations of Śiva in poetry, narrative, and festival. I view their formulations as human constructions and, on that basis, as comparable to those in other religions and cultures. My interpretation illuminates differences in the three perspectives (poet, biographer, festival public) beyond the two premises they hold in common that I discussed earlier. As I argued in my first book, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, representations of *bhakti* (“devotion,” “participation,” “sharing”) are not static; its vitality is enhanced with each successive interpretation.²² “Tradition” is made up of discrete moments of authorial agency that self-consciously link themselves to earlier efforts, even though their arguments and conclusions may be quite distinctive from what came before.

Embodiment

As I discussed in *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, the topic of embodiment was a prominent locus of interpretive attention in Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition: It served as a key overarching concern that could simultaneously reveal the commonalities and the distinctions among the discourses. For example, the three prominent male poet-saints Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar (seventh–eighth centuries) represented themselves as engaging in the bodily practices of singing on pilgrimage; their biographer (twelfth century) narrativized that image, in the historical context of imperial stone temples in which the singing of the poet-saints’ hymns was promoted by a specific class of hymn singers; and later philosophers (fourteenth century) classified the poet-saints as those who had “direct experience” of God and whose life stories and hymns thus could be understood as describing a tension between the bondage and the liberation of the soul, with the ultimate resolution of spiritual liberation. My aims in that study were to redirect scholarly attention from the tradition’s emphasis on the body of God to its emphasis on the bodies of the saints; to explore tradition’s creation of a devotional body that it deemed more valid than bodies earlier defined by caste and ritual; and to underscore the human work in the making of tradition.

In the present study, I specifically foreground the act of interpretation as a commonality rather than a topical focus such as embodiment since the three interpreters I consider in this study seem to take very different stances on the issue of embodiment and thus, as a theme, embodiment becomes less an emblem of created coherence and more a domain of contestation. There were, of course, instances of contestation in my earlier study: The poet-saint Appar was a Vēḷāḷa, a lower ritual caste than the two other prominent poet-saints, who were brahmin; the singers of their hymns in temples were made to stand at a distance from the ritual center of the temple; and philosophers were deemed to supersede poets in terms of their understanding and promotion of the path of liberation. But in the case of the present study, there is a glaring difference that disrupts the discourse of embodiment: In contrast to the three male poets, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār does not overtly thematize her own body in her poetry. Instead, her main theme is the body of the god Śiva.

And here we have to note that if we read the poems with the interpretive frame that their author is a woman we are already imposing the biographer's interpretation on the hymns, against which I cautioned earlier in this essay – for the author of the poems never does explicitly identify herself as a woman in her compositions. Very significantly, there are signature verses in her poems; a signature verse is a distinctive feature of *bhakti* poetry from the sixth to tenth centuries in Tamil literary tradition, and the poet we know as Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār appears to have been the first to use it. Such verses provide information on the composer, the composition (often specifying the number of verses), and the spiritual benefits to an audience that will appreciate and propagate the composition. Intriguingly, a signature verse appears in only three of her four poems. In the signature verses at the conclusion of “Sacred Linked Verses on Wonder” (hereafter, “Wonder”) and the two hymns entitled “Sacred Decade of Verses on Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu” (hereafter “Decade-1” and “Decade-2”), the poet self-identifies only as “Kāraikkālpēy.” For reasons I discuss later, this phrase is best rendered as “the ghou from the town of Kāraikkāl.” In and of itself, “*pēy*” does not have a gendered specificity.

However, the first two verses of the first “Sacred Decade of Verses on Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu” (“Decade-1”) do gender a *pēy* as female; the first stanza provides an intense physical description of a female *pēy*'s (calling the subject *peṇṇpēy*, “female *pēy*”) emaciated and strange body, and the second stanza, which is reasonably read as referring to the same subject, portrays her agitated mental state. Another image of a female figure is in the fifth verse, which portrays a female goblin (*kalutū*) with her baby daughter. Since medieval times, the physical portrait of the female *pēy* in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's “Decade-1” has been understood to be a self-description, and it served as a dominant inspiration for the fashioning of traditional bronze images for worship of the saint from medieval times until now, but there is no direct indication in the stanza that she is describing herself, since that portrayal – as well as the others that describe the female beings – is in the third person. As I discuss in [Chapter 3](#), the image of a female *pēy* was also a relatively stock image from the earlier classical Caṅkam poetry. The poet self-identifies as “Kāraikkālpēy” in her signature line, but, as I discuss in [Chapter 3](#),

what she may mean by *pēy* is open to question given the significant differences between the image the poet creates of her own devotional subjectivity and the image she describes of a female *pēy*.

On what grounds can we identify the author of this poetry as a woman? One avenue is to examine the content of the poetry, to see if there are themes and images that suggest that a woman is the author, especially if her concerns resonate with those that other female authors have expressed, on the basis of comparative study.²³ In order to avoid either relying on, or creating, an essentializing discourse about the nature of women and their concerns, the words of the female authors need to have center stage, as Caroline Walker Bynum demonstrated many years ago in her study of European medieval mystics.²⁴ Bynum's study suggested that the body was a major discourse in women's devotional literature, one that validated their religious expression as it challenged the tradition of male authors' degradation of the female body.

There are examples from within ancient Indian literature of poems pre-dating Kāraikkāl Ammaiār that can be reliably attributed to female authors. Some of this literature supports Bynum's thesis, and some of it does not. An example of supporting literature is the Buddhist *Therīgatha* or "Songs of the Nuns" collection, whose 522 stanzas are believed to represent works contemporaneous to the life of the Buddha in the sixth century BCE, but which were committed to writing in the Pāli language about five centuries later, in 80 BCE.²⁵ The poems by Muttā, Ubbirī, Sumangalamāta, and Mettikā are testimonial in nature, extolling the liberating powers of the Buddhist path, but along the way they reveal the authors' individualized framing of the nature of the challenges they face, in part by their use of "I." In several instances they explicitly remark upon their gender, as in the following example by Sumangalamāta:

A woman well set free! How free I am,
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery.
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,
And from empty cooking pots,
Free too of that unscrupulous man,
The weaver of sunshades.
Calm now, and serene I am,
All lust and hatred purged.
To the shade of the spreading trees I go
And contemplate my happiness.²⁶

The use of "I," the explicit identification of gender, and the critique of a social context that is oppressive to women are evident in this poem, which has in common with other Buddhist nuns' poems an emphasis on the "freedom" that becoming a Buddhist permits; in this poem, the theme is largely material freedom, whereas other poems emphasize spiritual or emotional freedom. These themes are elaborated upon in later biographies of the nuns. Hindu *bhakti* examples of women who wrote poetry that described social oppression on the basis of gender,

which was then elaborated in later biographies, would be Mahādēviyakka (twelfth century, Karnataka state in south India) and Mīrābāī (sixteenth century, Rajasthan state in north India).²⁷ Significantly, male *bhakti* poets adopted the female voice as an option in their devotional poetry, whereas female *bhakti* poets generally spoke in their own voice.²⁸

In poetry attributed to other ancient Indian female poets, such as the poets of the Tamil Caṅkam (“academy”) era of approximately 100 BCE–250 CE, whether the author is writing from her own gendered position or is participating in a common poetic language, or both, is left ambiguous. Notably, Tamil is the only regional-language tradition in India to span more than 2,000 years continuously; from the Caṅkam era we have approximately 2,381 poems, including 154 poems attributed to female authors such as Auvaiyār (59 poems), Veṇṇmaṇippūti, Velli Vītiyār, Kavar Peṇṭu, Kāḱkaipāṇiniyār Nacceḷḷaiyār, and Okkūr Mācattiyār.²⁹ Intriguingly, the famously prolific Auvaiyār was linked to “Kāraikkālpēy” in medieval texts, as I discuss presently.

As many translators have demonstrated, the Caṅkam poetry is a highly stylized use of Tamil language that, remarkably, was shared over several hundred years by poets.³⁰ The two major genres of Caṅkam poetry are “interior” (*akam*) and “exterior” (*puṛam*), with the former predominant in terms of both extant poetry and the traditional theoretical texts that discuss the Caṅkam corpus of poetry.³¹ The vast majority of poems in this corpus are not religious, which may be a factor in their lack of fit with Bynum’s thesis. Although a careful, sustained comparison of works of the male and female Caṅkam poets has yet to be done, it is clear that both male and female poets represented the hero’s and the heroine’s voices in “interior” (*akam*) poetry that explored love between a woman and a man; similarly, in “exterior” (*puṛam*) poetry about kings and battles, poets of both genders explored themes of the bravery of fighters, praise of kings, and the glory of mothers whose sons died in battle. Two poems from Auvaiyār from the *Puṛaṇāṇūru* (“exterior”) collection will illustrate the fluidity of poetic voice and gender:

(in praise of the chieftain and patron Atiyamāṇ Neṭumāṇ Añci)

Enemies,
take care
when you enter
the field of battle
and face our warrior
 who is like a chariot wheel
 made thoughtfully over a month
 by a carpenter
 who tosses off eight chariots
 in a day.

(*Puṛaṇāṇūru* 87; translated by Ramanujan)

(a mother imagining the manner of her son's death)

There, in the very middle
of battle-camps
that heaved like the seas,

pointing at the enemy
the tongues of lances,
new-forged and whetted,

urging soldiers forward
with himself at the head
in a skirmish of arrow and spear,

cleaving through
an oncoming wave of foes,
forcing a clearing,
he had fallen
in that space
between armies,
his body hacked to pieces:

when she saw him there
in all his greatness,
mother's milk flowed again
in the withered breasts
of this mother
for her warrior son
who had no thought of retreat.
(*Puranānūru*, translated by Ramanujan).³²

Tamil Caṅkam poetry employs gender motifs, so that the vast majority of “interior” poems depict the inner thoughts of a heroine, and the vast majority of “exterior” poems celebrate the bravery of a male chieftain and young male fighters; in both genres there is creative space for foregrounding alternatives, such as the voice of the hero in “interior” poetry and the sentiments of the mother who is glorified by the son's honorable death on the battlefield in “exterior” poetry. However, poets did not appear to have to match their own gender to the gendered motifs; they were able to choose to represent the experience of love and the experience of war from any of the established poetic motifs. I will return to the subject of representing experience in language later in this chapter. We can note here that the structure of the Caṅkam poetry was influential on later Tamil *bhakti* poetry; for example, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār drew on its motifs of the battleground and *pēy* in her “Decades” (as I discuss in [Chapter 3](#)), Māṇikkavācakar (ninth century) used the *akam* (“interior”) framework of lovers speaking to their family and friends,

and Nammālvār (seventh to early eighth centuries) used the *akam* convention to represent a mother describing her daughter's lovesickness – for the Lord in this case, not a boy as in the Caṅkam poetry.³³ In the case of the male poets, their use of the earlier poetic forms genderized the poetic voice, since *bhakti* poets spoke of their own experience; they promoted their adoption of the poetic female voice as an appropriate vehicle for expressing love for God.

Another avenue of gender study in literature is the critical examination of the attribution of works to a female author. The Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition preserves a record of several references that are understood to signify Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār; these are of interest to us as they show the interpretive trajectory of the definition of her identity, which represents her first as devotee and author, and then later as female. The first reference to her is the signature verses in her own poetry, as I have discussed. These references identify her as a devotee to Śiva (her poems are in praise of him) and as the author of the poetry. The first reference to her beyond the scope of her own poetry occurs in a hymn from one of the prominent male saints of the ninth century that purports to list all of the devotees, called “servants” (*tiruttonṭar*), to Śiva: Cuntarar’s *Tiruttonṭattokai* (“Collection of the Sacred Servants”).³⁴ In this poetic list of the saints there is a reference to *pēyār*, which means “the one who is a *pēy*.” Notice the interpretive gesture: The text asserts that the “servant” is a *pēy*. It is plausible that this term refers to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as she is the only Śaiva author who overtly thematizes *pēy*, although with its single word reference (which is the norm in the hymn’s references to the servants) it does not include information about gender or identification of the “servant” as an author.

A century or two later, references to “Kāraikkārpeyār” as an author appear in a medieval commentary on an ancient grammatical work and in a medieval work on prosody. Both Nacciṇārkkīṇiyar’s tenth-century commentary on the *Tolkāppiyam* and Ami(r)taṭcākarar’s late tenth- or early eleventh-century *Yāpparuṇikalam* cite a verse that they attribute to two authors, one of whom is “Kāraikkārpeyār.” Both the *Tolkāppiyam* and the *Yāpparuṇikalam* are texts that discuss prosody, meter, and versification in Tamil literature. They use examples to illustrate these topics, and the medieval works each cite a verse that they attribute in part to “Kāraikkārpeyār” in order to illustrate a “verse of sages.” In the earlier commentatorial citation, “Kāraikkārpeyār” shares the attribution with a female poet from the Caṅkam age (Auvaiyār, first century CE), which could point to a gendered association between the two authors in the mind of the commentator (today they are both understood to be female). In the latter, she shares the attribution with a male Tamil Viṣṇu-*bhakti* poet, Pūtattār, which may point to a temporal association between the two in the mind of the author (today they are both understood to date to the sixth century).³⁵ Though scant, these citations do provide evidence that the author referred to in the signature verses of the poems “Wonder,” “Decade-1,” and “Decade-2” was acknowledged as an author by the Tamil literary community beyond Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition.

An early attempt to provide some biographical details of the sixty-three saints, following the order of the saints in Cuntarar’s hymn and in most cases elaborating on

his brief mention of them, is Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi's *Tiruttonṭar Tiruvantāti* ("Sacred Linked Verses on the Sacred Servants") of the late eleventh century. Nampi's verse on Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is not, however, an elaboration on the information in Cuntarar's hymn but instead introduces other elements of the saint's story. He writes:

Thinking, "I will not tread upon my Lord's mountain," she walked on her head with her two legs high above. Umā smiled when she saw it, but the Lord whose body is coral in color called the lady "my Mother." She is the treasure of the town of Kāraikkāl, where the tree branches drip with honey.

Nampi omits any direct reference to *pēy*, and instead emphasizes the humanity of the saint: The female gender, her hometown of fertile Kāraikkāl, her journey to the mountain described in mythology as Śiva's abode, Mount Kailāsa, where he sits in majesty with his wife, Umā, culminating in the Lord's conferring the title of "Mother" (*ammai*) on her. The curious detail here is that she is walking on her hands, an inversion of customary human behavior. The text does not provide an explanation for it, though the goddess is represented as responding to that detail. An explanation from devotees and commentators that one often hears is that she is walking in this manner in order to keep sacred ground hallow, by not touching it with her feet, which are defiling in Indian tradition. This is plausible as a possible rationale for the story fragment's representation of her behavior, and it is significant because it provides an accessible motivation, but more generally the verse points to difference with this detail: She is distinctive in her dedication to Śiva. Significantly, the verse reveals the rationale for the saint name Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār; the name can be rendered several ways in English, including "the lady of Kāraikkāl," "the female saint from Kāraikkāl," and "the Mother from Kāraikkāl," with "the female saint from Kāraikkāl" perhaps capturing the most elements of this multilayered saintly personality.

The hagiographer Cēkkiḷār (twelfth century) brings together and elaborates greatly on the images of *pēy* and humanity from the earlier texts by Cuntarar and Nampi, respectively, in his sixty-six verses that tell the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār, though he does not cite those precursors by name in his telling of her story. In his narrative, the saint is a beautiful woman who bodily transforms into a ghou (pēy) and travels to Śiva's abode in Mount Kailāsa, where god calls her "Mother." He also explicitly cites the poetry of the saint, in verses 52, 53, 63, and 64 of his biography. In the first set of two verses he provides the reader with the names of her poems, *Arputat Tiruvantāti* ("The Sacred Linked Verses on Wonder"; "Wonder") and *Tiru Iraṭṭai Mālai Antāti* ("Sacred Double Garland of Linked Verses" now entitled *Tiruviraṭṭai Maṇimālai*, "Sacred Garland of Two Gems"; "Garland"). In the second set of two verses he provides the first words of two stanzas that are understood today to be the first stanzas of the two decades titled *Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam* ("The Sacred Verses on Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭu"; "Decade-1" and "Decade-2").³⁶

Based on this intertextuality in Tamil literary tradition, we can see that the poet and her biographer Cēkkiḷār attribute similar characteristics to the personage

“Kāraikkālpēy,” including identity as a devotee to Śiva, association with *pēy* (ghoul), and status as an author. The other references tend to prioritize one or two of these characteristics, whereas it is the poet and her biographer who bring together all three. As the focus turned biographical in the late eleventh to mid twelfth centuries, gender was unambiguously added to the core identity of this author and devotee. Nampi’s description suggests that oral stories about this author-devotee were circulating that identified her as female, hailing from Kāraikkāl and exhibiting distinctive devotional behavior. Cēkkiḷār, as we shall see in Chapter 4, also seems to have drawn on oral tradition, but it is clear that he drew on specific elements in Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s poetry in his construction of her identity. In particular, he created or solidified the conflation of the *pēy* (ghoul) of her signature verses with the body of the *pēy* described in the first verses of “Decade-1.” There is not necessarily any reason to doubt that the author-devotee known as Kāraikkālpēy, Pēyār, and Kāraikkāl Ammaiār was female. But it is noticeable that for the poet her own embodiment, including gender, was not a priority in her poetry, whereas her body and gender are defining characteristics in her biographer’s portrait of her.

Significantly, the biographer does interpret the saint’s poetry in the sense that he uses elements from her poetry to create a narrative of her life. His narrative embodies the devotional subjectivity that she creates, and develops it in ways that reflect his own concerns. He does not analyze stanzas of her poetry. His prioritizing of gender has created the situation in which we now find ourselves: How does it influence our reading of the poetry to assume that the author is female? Certainly the poetry becomes especially valuable, since women’s voices preserved from the past are precious few. Part of the task of our own interpretation of her poetry is to consider ways in which gender may or may not play a role in her experience of creating her poetry, in traditional interpretations of her works and life, and in our own experience of reading these materials. What we are tracing is a specific history of thinking about gender, including our own.³⁷

Language as communication and experience

The Tamil Caṅkam poetry came before Kāraikkāl Ammaiār; the references to her by Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* authors and Tamil literati came after. Within Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition she is believed to be the first poet-saint, and scholars place her later in the “post-Caṅkam period” (ca. 200–600 CE), with a majority suggesting 550–600 CE.³⁸ She is thus viewed as a transitional figure in Tamil literary and religious history, between the Caṅkam-era literatures and medieval literatures. She contributed to an established and developing literary tradition in Tamil, which already had texts devoted to characterizing and analyzing the nature of the Tamil language; the *Tolkāppiyam* grammar is the earliest and is variously dated between the eighth and third centuries BCE.³⁹ Thus, the Tamil language was self-consciously analyzed as a literary language and used for writing expressive literature (rather than simply communicative directives on mundane matters) well before the “vernacular revolution” of the early medieval period.⁴⁰

Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's use of Tamil is sophisticated in that she draws on both Tamil and Sanskrit literary traditions in creating her own compositions, as I discuss more fully in [Chapter 3](#). Her aim is to create and describe a devotional subjectivity through poetry, and not necessarily to promote Tamil as a place or Tamil language as a regional identity; her poetry does not have the elaborate descriptions of the Tamil countryside found in the later *bhakti* poets (and also in Caṅkam literature and the late-Caṅkam epics), and the phrase "pure Tamil" (*centamiḷ*), which is ubiquitous in the poetry of later *bhakti* poets, appears only once in her compositions ("Decade-1" v. 11, which is the signature verse). Linguistically, her works are distinct from Caṅkam-era literature in the much greater presence of Sanskrit terms in her poetry. Her naturalized use of Sanskrit terms does conform to the pattern that "Sanskrit tradition perfected the argument for the transcendence of its own authority," particularly in her deployment of Sanskrit terms for spiritual concepts such as *ñāṇa* ("highest spiritual wisdom").⁴¹ Still, in her blending of words from the two languages seamlessly in composition, she does seem to suggest, if not an equivalence, then certainly a compatibility between the two languages.⁴²

In terms of Tamil literary history, the complex *veṇṇpā* poetic meter was "the dominant metrical form of the [post-Caṅkam] age" used in the ethical literature composed during this period, including the most famous and widely translated Tamil work, the *Tirukkural* by Tiruvalluvar.⁴³ Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's *magnum opus*, the "Wonder," as well as her "Garland," use this meter. In fact, the structure of her *veṇṇpā* stanzas can be likened to the couplets that compose the *Tirukkural* insofar as she joins two couplets by means of a verbal "ornament" into a four-line stanza, and she rhymes the first word of the two lines in each couplet.⁴⁴ The *veṇṇpā* is known to be a difficult meter: A saying from the Caṅkam era asserts that *pulavarkku veṇṇpā puli* – "for poets, *veṇṇpā* is a tiger." Even so, *veṇṇpā* remained a form in use in later poetry collected, along with that of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, into the eleventh volume of the *Tirumurai* (the name of the Śiva-*bhakti* canon), and in the still later (fourteenth-century) canonical Tamil texts on Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy.⁴⁵

Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's *magnum opus*, the "Wonder," is in a form of *antāti*, which in her compositions is a set of verses (often in 100 stanzas, as in her "Wonder") in which the last word of a stanza becomes the first word of the following stanza. Her interpretation of this structure (*antāti*) is distinct from that used in the Caṅkam literature; in the earlier literature, such as the *Patirruppattu* ("Ten Tens," a collection of poems), "*antāti*" meant that many of the poems end in the same word, such as *nāṭē* ("the land").⁴⁶ In fact this older interpretation of *antāti*, which has the character of a refrain, more accurately describes Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's two decades on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu (*Tiruvālaṅkāṭut Tirupatikam*; "Decade-1" and "Decade-2"); in the first decade (ten verses plus a signature verse), most of the stanzas end in the phrase "our father dances in this place, Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu," while most of the stanzas in the second decade end with the word "dancing."⁴⁷ It is in her longer poems, both the "Wonder" and the "Garland," that the poet interprets *antāti* to mean using the same word with which a verse has concluded to initiate the next verse. In Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's poetry "[w]e find

here that *antāti*, emerging as a device of verse linkage in the Caṅkam period has grown into a full-fledged genre.”⁴⁸ It is notable that the first three authors of Tamil Viṣṇu-*bhakti* literature, named Poykai, Pūtam, and Pēy (note the use of *pēy*), also wrote in the *antāti* meter, and that their names were also obscured by subject-titles, possibly to camouflage their non-Brahmin identities, although this is speculative.⁴⁹ I have already mentioned that it is considered innovative that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār alternated the *venpā* meter with the *kaṭṭalaikkalitturai* meter in her “Garland” poem.⁵⁰ Both the *antāti* linkage scheme and the *kaṭṭalaikkalitturai* meter were used in later poetry collected into the eleventh volume of the *Tirumurai* (Śiva-*bhakti*) canon.

Her use of *viruttam*, a more free-form verse that is suitable for music, coupled with the structure of *patikam*, or set of ten verses (eleven including the signature verse), are also considered innovative.⁵¹ This is the form and structure that she used for her hymns on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu (“Decade-1” and “Decade-2”). As if to honor her early explorations, the majority of manuscripts and some printed editions of *Tēvāram* (the hymns of the three prominent male saints of the seventh to ninth centuries) place her *patikams* on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu at the head of the text, as though they are “stanzas of invocation.”⁵² The connection between music, *viruttam*, and *patikam* became predominant in the *Tēvāram*.

That the hymns of the three predominant male poets of the *Tēvāram*, as well as the two hymns of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, are sung highlights their nature as experience. In his aptly titled *Songs of Experience*, Norman Cutler describes the triadic rhetorical structure of *bhakti* hymns and poems as promoting contact among poet, God, and audience. He points to two of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s verses to illustrate various modes of “triangular communication” in early *bhakti* poetry. For example, in the following poem “the poet speaks directly to the deity,” and the audience “overhears” the poet’s words; in addition, the poet reveals some biographical detail and provides a description of the deity:

Birth in this body
enabled me to learn to speak
and to experience overflowing love;
with them, I reached
your sacred henna red feet.

And now I ask,
oh, lord of the gods
whose neck shimmers black,
when will the afflictions
that birth in this world also enables ever end?⁵³

In another example, Cutler suggests that one of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s poems specifies neither speaker nor addressee in the poem, while it offers a criticism of

insincere practice and an endorsement of devoted practice:

Let them go around
speaking only superficially
about learned texts;
the true nature of the lord with the sapphire-hued throat
is that he will appear in any form desired
by those whose practice is disciplined.⁵⁴

I will have more to say about Cutler's categories and Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poems in [Chapter 3](#). For now it is important to note that Cutler's overall argument about *bhakti* poetry is that such poetry emphasizes contact among poet, God, and audience in order to stimulate an experience of *bhakti*, or devotion:

The model of *bhakti* poetry developed here is rhetorical insofar as it concerns the interaction between author and audience and the ways that interaction is articulated in sectarian discourse. However, this is a special kind of "rhetoric" because the performance and reception of *bhakti* poetry involve not so much the *communication* of a message from author to audience as a profound *communion* between the two. The hymns themselves are the instrument of that communion. The communion between author and audience, which, as I have emphasized, is a communion between devotee and god (with each taking both roles), has profound theological significance. The aesthetic/rhetorical process, as described here, is, in the final analysis, a process of divination, and the hymns fuel that process. Through an all-consuming enjoyment of the sacred hymns, one experiences *bhakti*, and the experience of *bhakti* itself transforms the experiencer. Devotion engenders divinity in the devotee; thus the perfected devotee or saint is treated as a divine being. The sacred hymns, an important catalyst for devotion, originate in god and are offered back to god – the rhetoric of *bhakti* is cyclical. The experience of devotion that they engender and the divinity that follows from this experience also "circulate" in the system.⁵⁵

Its emphasis on what Cutler calls the experience of "communion" distinguishes the Tamil *bhakti* poetry from the earlier Caṅkam poetry and the post-Caṅkam ethical literature. Though they share the Tamil language, the possible comparison of Caṅkam poetry with that of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār is complicated by the fact that the authors of the Caṅkam poems describe scenes, people, and deeds of which they are not necessarily a part, especially dramatized experiences such as that of a mother's imagining of the death of her son on the battlefield, as in the poem by Auvaiār quoted earlier. However, *bhakti* poetry encourages one to understand (or interpret) that the author is an active participant (as observer, speaker, lover, etc.) and/or that the poem mirrors the poet's own experience. As I discuss in [Chapter 5](#), the experience of the saint's *bhakti* as represented in her biographical story is to the fore in current festival interpretations of her.

What about the reader of the poems today, especially students and scholars? Are the *bhakti* poems “poems of experience” for them and, if so, in what ways? As we saw earlier, Penner’s theory of interpretation is based on a theory of language; he focuses on the understanding, or interpretation, of uttered speech. That which is uttered is what the speaker or author offers us to work with. In putting the emphasis on communication, Penner radically critiques the dependence of scholarship in religion on an idea of “lived experience” (which Dilthey called *Erlebnis*) as a foundational, pre-interpretive “given.”⁵⁶ He advocates:

First of all, let us simply drop the quest for “the given.” In other words, let us resist the notion of “lived experience” as the starting point for our theory of interpretation. This is a radical proposal. It entails the conscious removal of all theological and metaphysical traditions that continue to haunt the study of religion; all notions of “the given,” the numinous, transcendence, ultimacy, the flux of experience, sensations, the really real and the like need to be set aside. Let us begin, instead, with the simple assumption that we are all interpreters who have the uncanny ability of making sense out of what others say every day of our lives.⁵⁷

For reasons I discussed earlier in this chapter, Penner’s view of interpretation is important to restoring the centrality of humanity to the humanities study of religion. Yet, given Cutler’s compelling interpretation of *bhakti* poems, it is of interest to me to find a place for experience that is compatible with Penner’s emphasis on human communication. In this regard, I am intrigued by Jeffrey Kripal’s recent discussion of his experience in studying mystical texts. The *bhakti* poems can be interpreted as mystical texts, since they are concerned with the union of the human and the divine, and so Kripal’s remarks do apply to reading them. Kripal, a distinguished scholar of mysticism, seems quite right to point out that our shared humanity supports claims to access meanings across very different conditions of embodiment (time, space, class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.). At the center of his comparative theorizing of mysticism is his study of the mystical utterances of the nineteenth-century Hindu saint Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. In Kripal’s second book, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, he sought to address questions of his access to the meanings of Ramakrishna’s utterances that were provoked by his first book.⁵⁸

At the conclusion of *Palaces*, Kripal briefly reviews theories of prominent scholars on the nature of interpretation, such as Donna Haraway’s notion of the “narrative self” that is “never finished” and “stitched together imperfectly,” which allows one “to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” William Dilthey’s emphasis on *hermeneutics* (“interpretation,” primarily of scripture) as “an exegesis or *interpretation of those residues of human reality preserved in written form*,” which Kripal calls “an essentially romantic vision”; Hans-Georg Gadamer’s image of “horizons” of meaning, in which the admittedly different stances of author and interpreter can overlap in partial “fusion” in hermeneutical understanding, which acknowledges that an interpreter brings her or his own

perspective to the text and, thus, “[u]nderstanding is therefore not merely reproductive, but also productive”; and Jürgen Habermas’ pressing of Gadamer’s theory to insist that the interpreter must submit tradition “to Enlightenment critiques and social-scientific methods.”⁵⁹

Kripal’s own formulation, which draws most explicitly on Gadamer, involves the acceptance of three premises:

(1) that we share, by virtue of our shared genetic makeup and common bio-cosmic environment, a great deal, even across times and cultures; (2) that the religious experiences (which are, in the end, always psychophysical experiences) we encode in our texts have the power to awaken similar experiences in the bodies and minds of those who engage these texts deeply; and (3) that these historical experiences are in turn radicalized and deepened further by the future horizons of meaning of their readers. It is in this kind of union, a hermeneutical union across space and time between human beings within an always renewable and developing form of critical consciousness, that our roads of excess finally end.”⁶⁰

Some of the principles of Kripal’s view of interpretation that I find most useful include his emphasis on a shared humanity, the engaged yet autonomous stance of the interpreter, the necessity of dealing directly with the sources, the development of new meanings, and the obligation of a “critical consciousness.” Helpfully, these principles decenter the supposed binary of “insider” and “outsider” that has held a prominent place in recent discourses on subjectivity and authorial authority by their insistence on the possibility of shared, though not identical, meanings. As I remarked earlier, I view interpretation as imbrication.

But I question the consistent importance that Kripal bestows on the interpreter’s experience as “similar” to the mystical author’s, as he states in his second principle and, indeed, throughout the book in his radical sections on “secret talk.” (Let me hasten to add that Kripal’s emphasis on the erotic experience is not at all troubling to me; exploring the erotic is an approach that highlights the body and it is an illuminating method especially when the mystical author’s language or personal history suggests that she or he was concerned with the erotic dimension of life.) From Kripal’s discussion, a “similar” experience seems to be the scholarly author’s own mystical experience. A mystical experience is one in which a person has direct and unmediated access to what is variously defined as truth, reality, the unconscious, God, etc. Certainly, a scholarly author can say that he or she has had a mystical experience while reading a mystical text and, more mundanely, such a claim could be viewed as bolstering the credentials of the scholarly author to discuss the mystical author’s text.

The issue is the value to the study of religion of what is claimed to be a “direct access” experience. To his credit, Kripal offered some initial reflections on this topic in a recent lecture, in which he urged that the field of the study of religion become more defined by what he semi-metaphorically termed the “right side of the brain,” in contrast to the “left side of the brain.” The former suggests unfiltered,

unmediated consciousness, whereas the latter suggests the filters that we have built through identities constructed from history, society, gender, race, class and so on, which surround the right side of the brain and mediate access to it. Kripal pointed out that the academic study of religion has greatly emphasized as its focus of study the issues that he labels as those constructed by the left brain's filter.⁶¹

Notably, though, in Kripal's recent lecture he did not specify a place for language, though in my view his talk suggested a mediating role for language. Kripal has said that "experience is interpretation."⁶² I would clarify that expressed experience is interpretation. In order for another person to access one's own experience, one needs to express that experience in an established mode of communication, such as language (in terms of my study, poetry and narrative) or gesture (in terms of my study, festival celebrations). If we act in a relational manner, such communication is necessary, and it is achieved through language and gesture, interpretation and translation. With this said, Kripal's reflections encourage us to acknowledge the role of experience, especially when, as Kripal argues with respect to mystical texts and Cutler argues with respect to *bhakti* poetry, the texts themselves put great emphasis on experience, promoting shared experience. Their own intensity places mystical and devotional texts in a distinctive category of the general principle that authors wish to engage their audience.

Like Penner, I am uncomfortable with taking up the idea of "unmediated experience" as a basis for theory, mainly because our only access to its purported existence is through language or gesture, which is already an interpretation. A mystical or devotional experience must be put into language in order for it to be recalled, named, and shared. Therefore, I put more emphasis on a different portion of the definition of mysticism, the desire for union. That which is expressed is a reaching from one person to another(s), with a desire to be understood. This is a desire for union, a meeting of the minds. *Communication is the everyday experience of non-duality*. "Non-duality" (*advaita*) is a prominent philosophical idea in Indian religions, one that was first raised in the Axial Age (ca. 800–200 BCE) traditions of Buddhism, Brahmanism (the *Upaniṣad* philosophical texts), and Jainism, although it was most famously interpreted by the Hindu philosopher Śāṅkara in the eighth century CE. For my purposes, what is interesting about the term is that, while "non-duality" means "not two" and thus signifies "one," the fact that "one" is described in terms of the negation of "two" points to a tension between "one" and "two," a tension that I call "not one and not two." What constitutes the "two" and the "one" is of course variously defined in the various Indian philosophical interpretations, but all of them encourage humankind to recognize the superficiality – and in some cases the unreality – of distinctions in order to experience and to enact the unity behind the diversity of appearances. In mystical understanding the unity will be the divine, and union with the divine is eternally sought. My use of the phrase "non-duality" is a little different. I am not equating my idea of union in communication with the theological and metaphysical aspect of mysticism; I am trying to characterize the moment of understanding. In communication, once we do understand (achieving the moment of not-one-and-not-two) what another human being is saying, we may not wish to continue listening to or

associating with that person – in fact, we may want to run in the opposite direction. But that does not vitiate the original sincere desire to understand someone else, and it is this genuine desire to understand that Penner and Kripal agree on, in my view. “Not one and not two” speaks to the simultaneity of union and distinction. We do not have to view differences, for example, between the vast array of mother tongues as “superficial,” but we also should not see them as obstacles to a shared humanity through communication. As Penner states:

[T]here are two principles at work when I interpret what you say (utter). The first says that we both have an indefinite number of beliefs that we agree upon as true. This principle holds for all speakers and hearers, that is, for all contexts of interpretation, whether it be from English to English, Hindi to English or Japanese to Russian. The second principle tells us that the first principle must hold if I interpret what you say as false. That is to say, we must first of all be in a linguistic context of massive agreement before we can disagree. Thus to assert that people live in different worlds, or that they hold incommensurable world views, or that something can be true in one culture but false in another, is incomprehensible. This conclusion should not be taken to imply that all therefore all cultures or religions are the same. It should be clear that “translatability” or “interpretation” entails different languages, cultures, religions.⁶³

Communication works on a principle of non-duality insofar as speaker and hearer are “not one and not two.” This experience of non-duality informs my translation of selected verses from the poems of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in the next chapter. The poet and the translator are not one, and they are not two. They are not one because we are separate people and the poems are rendered in English, a language other than the Tamil of their original composition. They are not two because I am translating what Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār has written; these are not poems that I have written. When an author translates her imagination, experience, feeling, or point of view into language or gesture, she creates a means to share it with others. When others understand and then communicate what she has said with still others, they are also translating that which she communicated. Translation is a mode of producing knowledge; we are all translators on a daily basis.

Penner is quite right to emphasize the communicative aspect of religious texts and performance; these productive activities are instrumental in creating communities. Text and performance are interpreted in a variety of ways by those communities to create a discourse of tradition that is accessible to others beyond borders. Cutler and Kripal are also right to emphasize the communion aspect of texts and performances that prioritize experience, often portrayed as mystical experiences, for these experiences inform the genesis, reception, and interpretation of the text or performance. What I have added to this discussion is that communication *has a communion aspect* that in specific ways is comparable to the mystical. Communion, or non-duality as I have suggested, occurs when there is

comprehension. Communication is shaped by the structure of grammar and diction, but we understand a spoken statement whose combination of words and ideas we have never heard before. Speech and gesture are a mix of rules and innovation. Poetry, which revels in the language of possibility, is especially strong in its creation of new, yet accessible, communication. So let us turn to the translated poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār.

2 The poet's voice

This chapter presents the poet's voice in a way that it is accessible to English speakers. I put this selective grouping (about half of her poems) here as a chapter in itself for two reasons. The first is that Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poetry falls at the beginning of the interpretive arc that has sought to understand and define the poet over the past 1,400 years. The second is my belief that it is important for the reader to have an opportunity to consider her poetry prior to my detailed analysis, including ways in which the methodological issues I discussed in the first chapter play out. In this translation, I have tried for a prose with poetic qualities. It is generally, though not universally, accepted that poetry should be translated by prose in order to avoid forcing either of the languages; thus G. U. Pope's rhyming, versified translation of a major work by Tamil poet-saint Māṇikkavācakar into English provides an example of the few strengths and many weaknesses of translating poetry into poetry.¹ However, my translation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poetry demanded that I engage principles that can generally characterize poetry, such as an economy of word and a resonance of image. One can compare my translation of her poetry to my translation of her biographer's tale (which is also in verse in Tamil) to understand my approach to the poetry. I have tried also for facility of comprehension in English, and evocation in the sense of "calling out" the meanings of the Tamil poem.²

I have chosen the following poems from Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's corpus, prioritizing her *Arputat Tiruvantāti* ("Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder"; "Wonder"). At 100 verses, which is five times the length of both her *Tiruviraṭṭai Maṇimālai* ("Sacred Garland of Two Gems"; "Garland") and her two poems on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu (*Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam*, "Sacred Stanzas on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu"; "Decade-1" and "Decade-2"), the "Wonder" is her *magnum opus*. This poem may have been viewed as especially representative of her work; for example, two late manuscripts that include her work, one of which is palm leaf, in the Government Oriental Manuscript Library at Madras University each have only the *Arputat Tiruvantāti*.³ With its 100 verses (which became the standard number of verses for the *antāti* meter), it has space for a wider scope than the much shorter "Garland," though the two poems are similar in terms of themes and rhetorical strategies; it is also more comprehensive than the Tiruvālaṅkāṭu "Decades," which, in their exclusive focus

on describing the cremation ground where Śiva performs his sacred dance, differ significantly from the “Wonder” and the “Garland” in subject, setting, and tone.

The title of this longest poem appears in Cēkkiḷār’s biography of the saint and represents his viewpoint, as the poet nowhere uses the term *arputam* (“wonder”) in her verses. I will take up the issue of interpreting the poem as “wonder,” as well as the biographer’s positioning of her four poems in relation to her life story, in my chapter on the biographer’s view (Chapter 4). My selection in this chapter is governed by my own interpretation of themes that appear to have priority to the poet given the frequency of their presence in her stanzas, and the categories I use to group the poems reflect those overlapping themes, more than one of which may appear in a single poem. As I mentioned, I have aimed to translate the selected poems in a creative manner to engage an English-speaking audience. The master of this kind of approach is, of course, A. K. Ramanujan, as evidenced especially in his translation of selected poems from Nammālvār’s (ca. 880–930 CE) *bhakti* hymns to Viṣṇu. He is closely followed by Norman Cutler, who translated a small selection of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār’s hymns in a way that emphasized her discourse as one directed to an intimate, which has influenced my translation (e.g., lower-case beginnings to “lord,” “his” and “you”). To emulate the timbre of their translations is an aspiration; what I can claim more concretely is to follow Ramanujan’s declaration that: “My arrangement is as much a part of the ‘translation’ as my verse.”⁴ My translations of all of the poems by Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār, with notes, appear in Appendix 1 of this volume. In this section, my translation of selected poems prioritizes the Target Language, English; whereas the Appendix prioritizes the Source Language, Tamil.

There are a few introductory comments about the poet’s worldview that I will note here, in the interest of providing the reader with some context in which to consider her poems. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is a devotee of Śiva, one of the major gods in Hinduism along with Viṣṇu (Vishnu; one of his avatars is Kṛṣṇa or Krishna) and the Goddess. Foundationally, her poetry is in praise of Śiva. Her poetry is visual; she evokes the image of Śiva through his physical characteristics. Many of these characteristics are related to heroic deeds he performed according to mythological stories written in the Sanskrit language. For example, his “neck shimmers black” is a reference to the time he swallowed poison in order to save the gods, and it stained his neck a blue-black color. He wears the Gaṅga in his hair, an allusion to the time he brought the Ganges River from the heavens to earth through the tangles of his matted locks so that her power would not destroy the earth. The hide of an elephant is tied around his waist, indexing the time he conquered a wild elephant set upon him by jealous and misguided sages in the forest of pines. He once destroyed powerful demon enemies’ triple citadels with a single flaming arrow. When he saw two other gods, Viṣṇu and Brahma, arguing, he silenced them by becoming a fiery pillar that reached from the bottom of the earth to the highest heavens; they could discover neither his source nor upper limit. Once he saved a boy devotee from death by kicking the Lord of Death away from him.

In providing a summary of Śiva’s form, C. Sivaramamurti invokes the section of Kālidāsa’s poem *Kumārasambhava* (ca. 400 CE) in which Śiva’s wife Pārvatī

rejects her own beauty in order to engage in ascetic practices of self-denial so that she may earn Śiva's love. When Śiva comes in disguise to dissuade her from her practices by listing all of Śiva's negative qualities (he wears a cobra and an elephant hide upon his back, he dwells in a graveyard, he rides upon a bull, he is poor and of unknown birth), she eloquently defends Śiva.

Kālidāsa has drawn attention to the impossible contradictions in the case of Śiva: he is himself the source of all wealth and confers prosperity on those who pray to him for it, yet he is clad in elephant hide, a beggar, and is the acme of asceticism, leading a whole galaxy of sages who have renounced the world. He is free from all passions, yet one half of his body is that of his beloved. He is one who, in spite of holding up the universe in its entirety (through his eight perceptible forms), is nonetheless unamazed at his own prowess, is little aware of it. He is the one deity who is the glowing light to brighten the path of righteousness, removing all approaches to gloomy and sordid acts.⁵

Further visual references to Śiva in Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poetry capture these aspects of his divine power. To indicate that he is an ascetic *par excellence*, powerful through his self-discipline and freedom from the snare of materialism, his hair is matted in the style of dreadlocks, his body is covered by the ashes that remain after the ritual burning of material elements (including human bodies), and he goes around begging. He is the master of the elements, bearing on his body especially those elements that are classified as opposites, including the waters of the heavenly Gaṅga and the hide of the earthly elephant familiar from his heroic deeds, as well as the celestial moon in his matted locks and the tellurian cobra around his waist. He is the embodiment of auspiciousness: The color of his body is red, which is an auspicious color in Indian tradition, and, indeed, the name Śiva itself means "auspicious." He is the Lord of Time in his aspect as a Dancer at the cremation ground, performing his cosmic dance of destruction: Attended by his retinue of ghouls, he dances atop the fires that consume the bodies and he even holds fire in his own palm. He is the Lord of the Third Eye: He has opened the power center in the middle of the forehead, mapped on the subtle body by texts on yoga as the *ājñā chakra*. Everyone is said to have this power center, but only Śiva can open and close this "third eye" at will. According to mythology, when Kāma, the Lord of Love, disturbed Śiva while he was meditating, his third eye opened and burned Kāma to ashes; ever since, love has had no body of its own but inhabits those who are in love.

Kāraikkāl Ammaiār loves the Lord. She considers herself to be in service to him, and addresses him personally as "you." She both praises him and asks him questions, which is also a sign of intimacy. Some of her questions concern ways to understand his nature; others have to do with her achievement of spiritual goals. A special concern of hers is *karma*, or "actions and their results." Indigenous religions of India all take it as axiomatic that our actions in this lifetime will affect our future lifetimes, as we are reborn and die again and again in a cycle of births.

All of the religions agreed that this is a problem that could be solved by dedicating oneself to a religious path. This selection of poems ends on a note of assurances, but for Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār the devotional path is one of both challenges and assurances.

Being a servant

Birth in this body
enabled me to express
my overflowing love
through speech,
and I reached
your sacred henna red feet.

And now I ask,
oh, lord of the gods
whose neck shimmers black,
when will the afflictions
that birth in this world also enables ever end?
(“Wonder” v. 1)

I aspired to only one thing;
I settled on it and left the rest

I kept in my heart only that lord
whose crest bears the Gaṅga
whose matted locks
are adorned with the sun and moon
whose palm holds the flames –

and I have become his servant.
(“Wonder” v. 11)

I perform austerities
my heart is true
and I have resolved to end my cycles of rebirth:

I have, in sum, become a servant
to the lord who is distinguished
by his sacred third eye,
his body covered with white holy ash
and his waist cloaked by the skin of an elephant.
(“Wonder” v. 7)

Oh, my simple heart!
Be happy and flourish in your humanity,
for you are safe within the great refuge
created by your overflowing love
in serving the lord who wanders about
immune from the reproach
he courts by wearing the bones of others as ornament.
(“Wonder” v. 31)

Was it not by grace
that I long ago achieved
the precious status of servant
to the lord who rules?

It was indeed grace
from the lord as majestic as a golden mountain
that bears rivulets of the sacred Gaṅga
like flames of streaming fire.
(“Wonder” v. 8)

Call him
ruler of the heavens
king of the gods
master of the domain
holiness of the highest knowledge
savior whose neck was blackened by poison

I call him lord of my heart.
(“Wonder” v. 6)

Even if the lord adorned with
the crescent moon, the river, the fire, and the cobra
does not take pity on us,
our devoted hearts know
that we are servants
to our dark-throated father.
(“Wonder” v. 23)

Oh, foolish heart,
worship the feet of the servants
who recite hymns devoted
to the only lord who wears the moon as a garland,
eschewing any association
with those who do not take him to heart.
(“Wonder” v. 40)

By controlling the five senses,
analyzing and rejecting false paths
and performing virtuous deeds,
they offer loving service to the lord
who is pleased to wear the split skin
of the powerful elephant on his cosmic forms.
(“Garland” v. 16)

Oh, dear heart, see
his majesty as the lord of the celestials
his beauty as the lord whose body is the color of coral
his grace as the lord whose neck is darkened by poison,
and desire him with a love that is true.
(“Wonder” v. 93)

They worship our father
of the long matted locks
by offering service,
adorning his feet with blossoms
and then praising him;

this is the joyful practice
of those who think only of him.
(“Wonder” v. 79)

The heroic lord

He is the creator
and the essence
of the eight forms:

the sun and moon
space, air, fire, water and earth
and the ritualist who harnesses their powers.
(“Wonder” v. 21)

In times of yore
the lord who bears the cobra
drank the poison from the awesome ocean
churned by the celestials,
which darkened his neck
like a shadow across the silvery moon
that crowns his red, snake-bearing matted locks.
(“Wonder” v. 55)

A ray of light
flowing from the young crescent moon
atop his glossy matted locks
appears as a sacred thread
across the chest of the first among gods
who is known for his powerful third eye
and fiery destruction of the triple cities in times of yore.
(“Wonder” v. 32)

We do not know the ways
in which cruel karma will affect us,
but we do know that it will punish
those who do not approach him sincerely,

for with a flaming arrow
he destroyed the itinerant triple cities
belonging to the demons who arrogantly thought,
“we are the most powerful.”
(“Wonder” v. 34)

The anklet
that the golden-bodied lord
of the powerful third eye
wears on his beautiful foot
is a sign of his victory
in subduing the cobra, the moon
the deer and the gushing river.
(“Wonder” v. 67)

His revered foot
crushed the powerful many-shouldered giant
who arrogantly lifted the mountain;
foiled holy Brahma and Viṣṇu
who wept and then joyfully praised him
when they could not find his limits;
and kicked Yama, the god of death, into submission.
(“Wonder” v. 80)

His fullness is unknown to anyone,
yet we can glimpse our lord's design
when he joyfully dances on the flames
adorned with skulls
and accompanied by grim ghouls
in the middle of the night.
(“Wonder” v. 30)

The gaze of his third eye,
which can appear as
long flames of fire,
soft cool moonlight
or the harsh rays of the sun,
immediately burned to ashes
the three fortresses
of his formidable foes.
(“Wonder” v. 84)

Oh, mind,
praise Lord Caṅkaraṇ forever:
He is the holy one
who is pleased to bear the proud cobra
atop his dangling matted locks,
and the protector
who saves us from piteously drowning
on days of distress.
(“Garland” v. 6)

His rubicund body is as luminous as morning
his white ash has the brilliance of noon
his matted locks are the crimson of sunset
his throat is the black of deepest night.
(“Wonder” v. 65)

Whirling
with eyes and mouth ablaze
the ghouls dance in a circle at the cremation ground;
their version is fear-inducing
as they grab burned corpses and devour the flesh.

Our father dances here
with leg lifted and anklets ringing
revolving body erect
emitting flames that scatter the foxes
at his home in Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.
(“Decade-1” v. 7)

Questions

If we, his servants,
understand our human sorrows
and bewail them,
why should the lord
 of the lustrous red body
 and the darkened throat
who is our master ignore us?
 ("Wonder" v. 4)

Even the luminous celestials
 who beseech our lord adorned with the moon
 not to wander about seeking alms
cannot deter him,
so what possible effect
could our admonition have?
He is known only to himself.
 ("Wonder" v. 43)

That which appears
again and again in my mind,
is it not
a sacred form of the lord
 as awesome as lightning
 yet protective as a refuge?
 ("Wonder" v. 24)

How shall I call my lord
who crushed the demon king
with a single toe, destroying his pride:
Śiva? Brahma? Viṣṇu?
The meaning of these distinctive forms
eludes me.
 ("Wonder" v. 18)

I became your servant
though I had not seen
your sacred form;
even today, I have not seen it.

So what will I answer
to those who repeatedly ask,
"Which is the form of your lord?"

What exactly is your true form?
 ("Wonder" v. 61)

Oh, incomparable lord
 who bears the bright crescent moon
 atop his matted locks
 and bestows us with grace,
 should I describe your darkened throat
 as night, a rain cloud, or a flawless sapphire?
 ("Wonder" v. 88)

Would the palm of your hand
become red from the flames dancing in it?

Or would the flames
absorb their color from your beautiful palm?

Oh, lord
 who bears bright flames in your palm
 as you dance with anklets ringing
 on the fire
 at the abode of the ghouls,
 make your reply to this.
 (“Wonder” v. 98)

Though he is adorned with a bobbing cobra
that does not let anyone come near,
along with a garland of skulls and bleached bones,
and he is pleased to ride a fierce bull,
can one doubt that these are no obstacles to love?
("Garland" v. 17)

I have taken refuge in him
and live as a servant
to the one who is uniquely known
as the sweetness in my heart
the husband of Gaṅga
the red bodied
the lord of the gods:
Why has he not favored me with his grace?
(“Wonder” v. 44)

Oh, our lord of the third eye
whose throat is darkened –

where did you hide yourself
when Viṣṇu
 who is dark like a rain cloud
 and even shares your motile body
could not find you in days of yore?
 (“Wonder” v. 54)

If I were blessed to behold
the highest form of the lord –

would I stand before him,
clasp my hands in honor,
focus my mind only on him,
and forever experience the bliss
of the lord of the celestials
 who dances on the flames?
 (“Wonder” v. 85)

The other side

Without explanation
our lord wanders everywhere
begging for sundry offerings,
then dances in the cremation ground
in the deepest night;

we want to know why he does this,
but what can we say now?
Should we see him one day
we shall ask him.
 (“Wonder” v. 25)

Even if he would not cure my afflictions
even if he would not pity me
even if he would not tell me the right way,

the love in my heart
for our lord
 bedecked with bones
 as he dances on the flames
 at the burning ground
will never cease.
 (“Wonder” v. 2)

In this miserable burning ground
young ghouls scavenge the desolate theatre,
disappointedly find nothing to eat
and settle for sleep;

while at twilight,
 flawlessly in time to the rhythm
 of heavenly drums
 effortlessly bearing fire in his palm
the beautiful one dances.
 ("Decade-2" v. 7)

Oh, lord who destroyed
the demons' power
by a single flaming arrow to their triple forts,

hear our persistent pleas
that you ornament yourself
with a necklace of gold
in place of that cobra on your chest.
 ("Wonder" v. 27)

All those who do not understand
the lord's true meaning reject him:
They cannot see his embodiment
as a ghoulish wearing skulls
to be his beautiful body
adorned with sacred ash.
 ("Wonder" v. 29)

Would the lord who dances
 at the burning ground
 inhabited by ghouls
only secretly pity all souls?

Oh unfortunate ones,
when he feels pity,
how would he not help?
He will give all the world
to those who pray to him each day.
 ("Wonder" v. 78)

Don't be quick to criticize us.
Don't you know that
as servants full of praise
 for the red feet
 of the lord with the rivered locks
we understand him
and will abide with him
in this life and those that follow?
 ("Wonder" v. 91)

Please do not bring your beautiful wife
 gracefully adorned with plait and bangles
to the cremation ground
when you vigorously dance on the flames
accompanied by ghouls
at midnight,
your anklets resounding.
 ("Wonder" v. 51)

Whenever you wander
begging across this world,
see that you remove
the menacing cobra you bear

or else chaste women,
afraid of the live venomous
ornament bobbing on your head,
will not offer alms.
 ("Wonder" v. 57)

Oh lord who eternally dances
 in that wide cremation ground,
attended by ghouls singing with powerful voices
 and goblins worshipping your ankleted feet:
Why did you fire a single arrow from your bow,
 incinerating your enemies' triple citadels?
 ("Garland" v. 15)

Should I obtain a blessed view
of his highest form,
I would not wish for anything else
even if I was entitled;
the lord with the third eye
has granted me some knowledge
and I have joined his loyal band of ghouls.
 ("Wonder" v. 86)

Assurances

Let them go around
speaking only superficially
about learned texts;
the true nature of the lord with the sapphire-hued throat
is that he will appear in any form desired
by those whose practice is disciplined.

(“Wonder” v. 33)

The lord who is the source of the universe
is surely visible to seekers;
those who offer worship
behold him,
those who offer love
see a sacred light in their minds.

(“Wonder” v. 17)

Earnestly practicing the path of worship,
desiring the lord's supreme grace,
you ask where he resides:

It is easy for those like me to see
that he lives in our hearts.

(“Wonder” v. 45)

If we reach
our incomparable lord of wisdom
by lovingly praising him with garlands of hymns
and adorning his golden feet with ribbons of flowers
how could the stain of our negative karma
possibly affect us?

(“Wonder” v. 87)

We have conquered death
escaped from cruel hell
and uprooted the consequences of karma,
for we rely only on the lotus-like feet
of the beautiful lord
who discharged a flaming arrow
that destroyed the forts of the arrogant demons.

(“Wonder” v. 81)

Anyone who prays
with wholehearted mind and body
and careful attention
to the moon-crested lord
who destroyed the triple fortresses
of his belligerent and arrogant foes
will not be reborn as flesh and bone.
(“Wonder” v. 37)

Oh, my heart
we have received the grace of the lord
and now we are saved;
we have no more sorrows,
for we have swum across
the roaring ocean of innumerable births
accumulated from a sea of karma.
(“Wonder” v. 16)

Should they
know of no other lord besides him;
enshrine him in their minds;
praise him;
and live without ever forgetting him,
the lord will protect them
from rebirth in this wide world.
(“Garland” v. 2)

The lord
whirls in his sacred dance,
crowned with the moon in his matted locks
his waist encircled by a bobbing cobra;
by his grace
Kāraikkāl ghou of the blazing mouth and teeth
thrives at this burning ground,
and those who sing her ten hymns and dance
will have all their ills destroyed.
(“Decade-2” v. 11)

He is the entirety
his essence is beyond his self
his pure matted locks are like coils of gold
he blessed the celestials with his grace

he owns me.
(“Wonder” v. 92)

With heart melting,
Kāraikkāl ghoul offered these words
as a garland of linked alliterative verses;
those who recite them
will reach the lord
with the inexhaustible love and adoration
characteristic of undying devotion.
("Wonder" v. 101)

3 The poet's vision

Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ said that she would commune with God herself. The way she said this was to compose two poems and two hymns that expressively trace an intimate relationship between herself and Lord Śiva, between human and divine. To study her poetic representation of this intimacy, this chapter uses several interpretive strategies. The first is to keep closely to themes and ideas that can reasonably be understood to emerge from within her compositions themselves. The reason I adopt this strategy is in part to counteract the disproportionate influence that her biographer's narrative has had in representing her ideas, interests, and self. Of course I will bring in other literatures with which the poet may be in dialogue, as well as aspects of her political and social context, but these are not the focus. The focus is on what she is saying in her poetry about her communication and communion with Śiva. In taking this stance, I self-consciously prioritize the sum as greater than its parts: Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ creates a devotional subjectivity that is more than a collection of literary, social, and political influences.

Another interpretive strategy I use is the provision of a brief thematic overview of each of her works (for a literary overview, see [Chapter 1](#)), and then a more extended discussion of themes across her works, using the categories from the previous chapter. Though I respect the interpretive strategy that sees each entire poem or hymn as a unique whole that possesses its own structural integrity, I do not find this methodology desirable for engaging with the compositions of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ, for such an approach would tend to narrativize her compositions, creating a story that develops from the beginning to the end of each work.¹ Though each entire work does deploy a structural strategy for creating continuity within itself – her two poems link verses by using the last word of a verse as the first word of the next verse, and each of her two hymns uses a common refrain to link their stanzas, and there are, as well, thematic clusters in all of her compositions in which a sequence of verses pursues a common theme – her verses within each work are discrete, functioning more as meditations on a mode of being. There are patterns of expression that one can discern from having studied the whole, but there is no linear story presented within each composition. However, the Śiva-*bhakti* tradition has interpreted select verses in the “Wonder” as providing a link to the “Decades,” which I discuss in the section of this chapter on “the other side.”

The *Arputat Tiruvantāti* (“Wonder”) is the longest and most comprehensive of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s compositions. It begins with a verse that refers to the author’s biological birth, the growth of her love for the Lord, and her reaching his sacred feet; and it concludes with a signature verse that expands the opening verse in its assurance that all those who recite the verses penned by the author will experience the growth of their love, and will reach the Lord. As such, the first verse illustrates the theme of being a servant, and the concluding verse illustrates the theme of assurances. However, the ninety-nine verses between the beginning and the ending verses provide multiple examples of all the five themes used in the previous chapter as five categories for the translation of selected poems, including being a servant, the heroic Lord, questions, the other side, and assurances. For example, although the signature verse illustrates the theme of assurances, the majority of the ten poems prior to it in her composition form a thematic cluster that illustrates the theme of questions. Thus, the arc of the entire poem does not bring the author, or the reader, to a state of complacent assurance but instead foregrounds active engagement with the Lord through the questioning heart and mind. This example not only demonstrates that there is no linear “story” to the poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār but also reveals the limitations of the thematic approach insofar as that approach conceals the oscillation of the five categories within the poem. I will discuss oscillation of themes and thematic clusters in this chapter, even while maintaining the categories as a structure for my discussion. Readers interested in viewing common themes and their oscillation in her compositions as they are preserved today are encouraged to read the “Wonder” and her other poem (“Garland”) and hymns (“Decade-1” and “Decade-2”) in their entirety in [Appendix 1](#) of this volume.

Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s voice in the “Wonder” is expressed in the five modes of poetic voice identified by Norman Cutler as forms of the “triangular communication” that is characteristic of early *bhakti* poetry: The poet speaks to the deity; the poet speaks to the audience; the poet speaks to her own heart; the poet speaks to an unspecified addressee; and neither speaker nor addressee is specified in the poem.² Examples of each of these voices can be found in the stanzas of the “Wonder” translated in [Chapter 2](#) of this volume, and I will discuss specific examples later in this chapter. For now it is enough to note that the “Wonder” explores all five voices, though it does not do so evenly. Especially interesting is that the largest number of stanzas in Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s corpus identifies neither the speaker nor the addressee. Cutler illustrates this fifth category of poetics with reference to one of her poems from “Wonder:”

Let them go around
speaking only superficially
about learned texts;
the true nature of the lord with the sapphire-hued throat
is that he will appear in any form desired
by those whose practice is disciplined.

(“Wonder” v. 33³)

In this poem we can see that, though there is obviously a speaker, no specific reference is made to that speaker, nor are any details provided to us about the intended audience for the thoughts the verse expresses. These types of verses are the most numerous category of poetics in Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's corpus, representing about a third of her "Wonder," about a quarter of her "Garland," and all of the verses save the signature verses of her "Decade-1" and "Decade-2."⁴

Intriguingly, in Cutler's view, poems with this voice are actually not at the core of *bhakti*:

I would argue that Tamil Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva audiences use poems in which the poet unambiguously addresses the deity, the audience, or his own heart as a standard for interpretation of poems with less precisely defined rhetorical structures. This contention is supported by sectarian exegetical literature in which the poetry of the saints tends to be interpreted as a confessional document of the poet's quest to obtain the lord's grace or as a sermon in which the poet shows his audience the way to find the lord. From this point of view, the poems that are rhetorically most direct may, for purposes of analysis, be considered to be at the "core" of the Tamil *bhakti* corpus; they constitute a standard. Poems in which no addressee is specified occupy a stratum once removed from the core, and poems in which neither speaker nor addressee is specified are located even farther from the center.⁵

Is Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār *off-bhakti*, meaning that she meanders on a byway rather than progressing on the main path of devotional tradition?⁶ If one views her work through the compositions of the three male poets who followed her, and sectarian literature beyond that, then Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār does appear through her *magnum opus* to be *off-bhakti*, since her compositions accent non-specificity within the context of a multiplicity of rhetorical strategies that make use of specificity. Overall, she does not adopt the consistent directness of voice of the later poets, even though they may well have been inspired by what directness does appear in her compositions, especially her direct address of God and her own heart and mind. Significantly, among early *bhakti* poets Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār may not be alone in her emphasis, for non-specificity of speaker and audience is noticeable in the poems that Cutler translates from early Viṣṇu-*bhakti* poetry, although solidifying this comparison would constitute a different study than the one I undertake here. Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's experimentation with multiple poetic voices in her longest poem is significant in that it provides a feeling of oscillation, which indexes active engagement with the Lord; her accent on non-specificity of speaker and audience affirms the applicability of the designation "meditations" to her poetry.

The *Tiruviraṭṭai Maṇimālai* ("Garland") is similar to the "Wonder" in terms of thematic content. Like the "Wonder," it explores all five of the thematic categories I have identified, and it also has stanzas in each of the five rhetorical strategies identified by Cutler. The most significant difference between the two texts is the "Garland's" emphasis on the rhetorical strategy "the poet speaks to her own heart"; about a third of the "Garland," the largest percentage of verses in a single poem,

deploys this strategy.⁷ In these sorts of verses, the poet speaks to herself and the audience overhears her; thus the autobiographical dimension of *bhakti* poetry is more pronounced in this shorter poem. Curiously, then, this shorter poem lacks a signature verse, that most self-referential of all stanzas, in contrast to all of her other compositions. Since, in keeping with proper *antāti*, the last word of the last verse is the same as the first word in the first verse of the text, thus completing the linking of the verses, it seems unlikely that there originally was a signature verse for this poem, since in the Tamil the final word of verse 20 (*kiḷarntu*, lit., “to increase”) begins verse 1.

The two decades (sets of ten verses plus a signature verse) that are today known as the *Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam* (“Decade-1” and “Decade-2”) are so different from Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār’s two poems that a question of authorship – rather than just the usual questions of later interpolation, editing, and miscopying of the text – seems to present itself, though I will leave detailed study on this issue to linguists. The most glaring difference is that the rhetorical structure of both decades is the most ambiguous poetic category, in which neither the speaker nor the audience are specified. Although, as I mentioned, there is a large number of this type of stanzas in both “Wonder” and “Garland,” the significant difference here is that in “Decade-1” and “Decade-2” there is no variation on this, with the exceptions of the signature verses (which are a category unto themselves). Revealingly, there are no questions posed in the “Decades,” unlike the two poems. Each stanza of both “Decades” reads as a third-person description of the cremation ground and the activities that take place therein. Thus, the “Decades” lack the rich variety that characterizes the “Wonder” and the “Garland” in terms of both voice and content.

Moreover, in contrast to the other poems, the “Decades” bring place into the picture; there is the cremation ground, and there is also an explicit identification of place with the use of the name *Tiru Āḷaṅkāṭu*, although this name appears only in “Decade-1” and is conspicuously absent from “Decade-2.” The decades read as an eyewitness account of the scene and activities that take place at the cremation ground, including the thorny, dried-out plants, the sudden movements of animals, the lavish gruesomeness of ghouls’ activities, and the Lord’s strenuous yet graceful performance of dance. Much of the emphasis is on the scene and the ghouls; the Lord, with more or less description, becomes a refrain: In “Decade-1” the refrain is “our father resides at *Tiru Āḷaṅkāṭu*,” while in “Decade-2,” which notably does not even mention *Āḷaṅkāṭu* by name in any of its stanzas, the refrain is that the “lord dances.” Two verses in “Decade-1” use the third person to describe a female ghoul. Tradition, at least beginning with the poet’s hagiographer Cēkkiḷār, has understood this to be a self-description on the part of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār, and as such it also informed the iconography of bronze statues of the saint designed for ritual use. This conflation of the author with the image is also widespread in scholarship today. However, the use of the third person challenges this easy assimilation. I discuss this aspect of the hymns more fully in the section on “the other side.”

Lastly, the two decades are hymns, in that they were at some point set to music.⁸ Music is part of the imaginary of the scene at the cremation ground, and a stanza in “Decade-1” (v. 9) is well known to musicologists as it lists the traditional keynotes of ancient Tamil music that are used in tunes known as *paṇs* (the term is used within the poem), as well as traditional instruments, most of which are percussion. This musical dimension suggests that these decades were either sung by the poet herself or by those who appreciated her works. Significantly, the works of the three famous male saints all used the decade of stanzas (*patikam*) form, the meter (*viruttam*), and the setting to music that are found in “Decade-1” and “Decade-2,” although these later poets eschewed descriptions of the cremation ground, replacing them with descriptions of the fertility of the Tamil countryside. The fact that the decades of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār are found at the head of some editions of the three famous male poet-saints in a compilation known as *Tēvāram* authoritatively and honorifically makes the connection between her poetic style and theirs.⁹

Being a servant

In her first verse of the “Wonder,” Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār begins at the beginning, tying her biological birth to the birth of her devotional subjectivity:

Birth in this body
enabled me to express
my overflowing love
through speech,
and I reached
your sacred henna red feet.

And now I ask,
oh, lord of the gods
whose neck shimmers black,
when will the afflictions
that birth in this world also enables ever end?

This stanza, initiating her longest work, sets the tone for the entire poem, and it seems clear that the poet views the creation of a devotional subjectivity to be at the heart of her life and her work; the poet herself provides us with this frame for interpreting her poetry. Embodiment, love for Śiva, and speech to express her love for him are the core elements of her devotional subjectivity.

Cutler points to this poem as his illustration of the rhetorical strategy that the poet speaks directly to God, which is the first of his categories of poetics; about a quarter of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's verses in the “Wonder” and the “Garland” are in this category.¹⁰ We know she is speaking to God by the poet's direct appeal to him, in which she expressively joins together images of both intimacy and majesty. She uses the second person possessive pronoun (“your”; *niṇ*), which is in the familiar

form (Tamil has both familiar and formal forms of the second person pronoun). The poet is not only speaking directly to God but is addressing him on very familiar terms. This familiarity shares space with her more formal appeal to him as “lord of the gods,” conjuring a majestic image of his divinity as the highest. That both intimate and formal modes of address appear in the same poem is characteristic of *bhakti* poetry, and Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār was a pioneer of it.

In this stanza the audience “overhears” her brief autobiographical description and her plea. Her mini-biography culminates in “reaching God’s feet,” which became a popular trope in later *bhakti* poetry. This is a physical representation of familiarity, paralleling the poet’s use of the informal form of “you,” since “reaching” suggests touching. However, the trope also relates to the idea that God is the Supreme, for the *bhakta* (one who practices *bhakti*) assumes the humble stance of yearning to reach even the lowest point of the lord’s body. In Indian tradition, the feet represent a disfavored category; beginning with the Vedas, feet are associated with servants.¹¹ In fact, “feet” followed by a personal ending (e.g., *aṭiyān*) became a term used to designate servants to the lord in Tamil *bhakti* poetry; Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār uses the term only infrequently, though it became a standard in the poetry of the three famous male Śiva-*bhakti* poet-saints who lived 100 years or so later.¹² This *bhakti* sense of “servant” revises the Vedic associations: Rather than drawing an equivalence between the servant and feet, the *bhakti* servant serves, and reaches, the feet of the lord. Thus, “reaching God’s feet” combines both humility and the joy of proximity to God; the *bhakta* has reached the lowest part of the lord’s body (which *bhakti* poetry represents as the only part of the lord that is attainable by devotees), yet by doing so has achieved salvation (which *bhakti* poetry frequently represents as being saved from karma and the cycle of birth–death–rebirth). However, if “reaching God’s feet” is a sign of ultimately being saved, the poem makes it clear that the embodied self still experiences troubles, so that “reaching God” is a refuge in the midst of continuing sorrows.

The body enables both the experience of sorrows and the experience of the love that is necessary to “reach the Lord’s feet.” Notably, the poet presupposes her own body, whereas she describes the Lord’s body; humankind is a type, whereas the Lord is unique. In this verse it is the lord’s body that she describes through carefully chosen synecdoches: His feet naturally henna colored, which is the part of the lord that is accessible to her, and his neck darkened from swallowing poison, which is a reference to one of the lord’s heroic deeds as described in mythology. Thus, her devotional subjectivity views the lord as both personal and majestic. He is unique because she desires only him, and because the epithets she uses – red feet and darkened neck – can describe only Śiva. Indeed, the poet herself remarks upon the fact that he is uniquely known through such characteristics (“Wonder” v. 44). The human body is, by contrast, not a subject of adoration but instead a vehicle for a devotional subjectivity that loves and extols the body of the lord and which makes it possible to express love through the materiality of the body (mouth, throat, tongue, etc.) and the sensuality of sound. The “I,” which is unambiguously rendered in this verse by a first person singular verb ending, is embodied, but it is

not individualized by the details of its embodiment, or else the poet would have provided us with details about her gender, caste, family, and so on. As the “Wonder” and the “Garland” represent the majority of the poet’s works, and as they offer an explicit sense of the “I,” in contrast to the “Decades,” which, as I have noted, are very different in style, including their exclusive use of the third person voice, I will focus on them in this section, leaving a discussion of the “Decades” to the section on “the other side.”

As the verse makes clear, experiencing sorrow is involuntary, whereas reaching for God is complexly voluntary. On the one hand, reaching is naturalized as the growth of love; on the other hand, it is tied to learning – specifically, learning language. Both the heart and the mind are necessary for reaching the lord: The heart is naturalized in its feeling of love, but to express that love requires learning the art of verbal articulation. Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s poetry, like the Tamil language itself, deeply connects the heart and the mind; it is an aspect of Tamil subjectivity that the *bhakti* poets noticed, claimed, distinctively rendered as central to devotional subjectivity, and propagated. The words that Kāraikkāl Ammaiār as well as later poets use, such as *neñcam* and *maṇam*, can be understood and translated as either “mind” or “heart,” depending on the context and choice of the interpreter (for an example of translating the single term *neñcam* in these two ways, see “Garland” vv. 1, 4).

Kāraikkāl Ammaiār does not use the term *bhakti* (in Tamil, *patti*) in her poetry. She is concerned with describing the embodiment of devotion. Frequently in her verses the poet uses the terms *toṇṭar* or *āl*, “servant,” to refer to those who devote themselves to Śiva.¹³ This descriptive category of embodiment names the “type”: It groups the individual embodied self with a description that can apply to others. It is a devotional subjectivity that inscribes the humility of the person, as well as the superiority of the one served. The *bhakti* servant is defined by devotional work. The poet mentions a variety of actions that involve the mind, heart, and body in enacting a devotional subjectivity, including admiring the beauty of the Lord (e.g., “Wonder” v. 65); worshipping the Lord by performing service and offering flowers (e.g., “Wonder” v. 79, “Garland” v. 11); praising God (e.g., “Wonder” v. 40); performing austerities (e.g., “Garland” v. 10); and striving to understand the lord through asking questions (I discuss this category later in this chapter).

The foundation for any discrete act of service is the work of actively keeping the Lord in one’s mind or heart. This is not a memory of love, which would put a barrier of time between devotee and God: It is instead the eternal now, and is distinguished from human love as portrayed in classical Sanskrit texts.¹⁴ A relationship lives in the now. With the exception of stanzas that describe Śiva’s heroic deeds explicitly as having occurred in the past, as well as the few among the autobiographical verses that reference the past (e.g., “Wonder” vv. 1, 8), the time frame of all of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s poetry, including the “Decades,” is the now. The poet’s explicit admonishments to keep the mind and the heart focused on Śiva point to the implied nature of humankind as not living in the now, rather being

constantly worried about either the past or the future. But the poet, living correctly in the now, addresses both the past and the future:

Should they
know of no other lord besides him;
enshrine him in their hearts;
praise him;
and live without ever forgetting him,
the lord will protect them
from rebirth in this wide world.
(“Garland” v. 2)

In this and in other poems that explicitly mention karma (“actions and their results”), the poet makes it clear that keeping the lord in one’s mind and heart outweighs actions that have the effect of trapping humankind in a cycle of birth and rebirth, which is the central problem of the human condition addressed by all indigenous Indian religions. That is, the nature of one’s past actions is believed to determine the nature of one’s rebirth, including gender, caste, socio-economic status, occupation, and so on. But, as this stanza asserts, serving the lord in the now eclipses the certainty of rebirth, and by implication the karma that would give rise to it. Each stanza of the poet’s compositions offers a new opportunity to engage with the lord here and now, and this relationship saves one from the future effects of past actions.

The poet’s reference to “them” – described as devotees who enact the devotional subjectivity she traces – raises the issue of the extent to which the poet perceives herself as being joined to others in a devotional community, and this is an open question.¹⁵ Two of Cutler’s categories of *bhakti* poetics deal with the relationship between the poet and her audience. One category is “the poet speaks to the audience.” In Cutler’s words: “[a] *bhakti* poet may pull his audience into a poem by using second person pronouns and verbal forms, imperatives, vocatives, and similar resources of language.”¹⁶ If we take references to the audience by a second person item of speech (whether or not the pronoun “you” is actually used) to be the standard, then this type of rhetorical strategy is rare in the “Wonder” (five poems) and the “Garland” (two poems).¹⁷ For example:

You *bhaktas* should understand
that the moon is saved.
The lord whose throat is dark
as water at night
knows the mind of the glossy cobra,
and shelters the moon on his head.
(“Wonder” v. 22)

Understand that
 the lord of the long red-gold locks
 entwined with hissing cobras
 and clusters of *konrai* flowers swarming with bees
 will not ignore the suffering
 of whose who adoringly praise him
 day after day.

("Garland" v. 3)

The poet takes a variety of stances with respect to the "you" of her audience. Rarely, she actually tells the presumed devotee hearers how to practice devotion (e.g., "Wonder" v. 46; "Garland" v. 9). More commonly, she offers assurances as encouragement ("Wonder" vv. 22, 45, 78; "Garland" v. 3). In one very striking stanza, she confronts the "you" as those who have maligned devotees of Śiva ("Wonder" v. 91).

A complicating factor is Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's use of the pronouns "I" and "we." Only in the "Wonder" does the poet unambiguously represent "I" via pronoun, possessive pronoun, or verb ending, and these instances number about a fifth of her stanzas.¹⁸ When her direct appeals to her own heart or mind are added from both the "Wonder" and the "Garland," about a third of the verses in those two poems unambiguously reference the first person singular; herself.¹⁹ The ambiguity is that frequently she uses the pronoun *nām*, and its related forms, which today means "we," including the hearer; so, from today's perspective, many of her stanzas read as inclusive of herself with others, while in ancient Tamil literature that same term can mean "I." The term has more fluidity and less formality than the "royal we" in English, but readers of the English translation can employ this strategy in reading the text.²⁰ Factors that would discourage such a reading (that "we" means "I") are that it may unnecessarily and/or inaccurately isolate the author; also, as the author specifically uses the forms that now delineate "I" and the different forms that now delineate "we" (inclusive), she may have been intending a difference (the different forms are not used for metrical purposes, in my estimation), and so I reproduce that difference in my translations, only translating as "I" when the verbal forms that now mean "I" are used in the poem, and only translating as "we" when the verbal forms that now mean "we" are used in the poem – with one exception.²¹

Significantly, there is a cluster of "I" references right at the beginning of the "Wonder," in eight of the first eleven verses; thus, this poem begins on an explicitly personal note in representing the poet's thoughts on devotional subjectivity.

I perform austerities
my heart is true
and I have resolved to end my cycles of rebirth:

I have, in sum, become a servant
to the lord who is distinguished
by his sacred third eye,
his body covered with white holy ash
and his waist cloaked by the skin of an elephant.
(“Wonder” v. 7)

This poem describes her body (practicing austerities) and her heart and mind focused on the Lord, as defining her servitude to him. The verse frames these actions as ones personally undertaken by her to the Lord, who is described by his unique characteristics that distinguish him from all others. The poet does not specify an audience in this poem, which makes it an illustration of Cutler's poetics category of "the poet speaks to an unspecified addressee." In these types of stanzas, the poet definitely identifies herself, often describing her thoughts and activities in relation to the Lord, but she does not address her remarks to anyone in particular. That she identifies herself distinguishes this category from the largest category of stanzas in her corpus, "neither speaker nor addressee is specified in the poem." The rhetorical strategy she adopts in this stanza is also in contrast to the categories in which the poet speaks directly to the deity, the poet addresses the audience (in a second person form), or the poet speaks to her own heart; in all of these cases the intended hearer is specified in the poem. It is a noticeable pattern (but not a rule) that many of the stanzas in which the poet speaks to an unspecified addressee describe her own state, explicitly using first person singular verbal forms.²²

The issue is how to locate her poems that address “we” or “us.” I suggest that we understand them as a subcategory of “the poet speaks to the audience.” One subcategory is that in which the poet uses “you” to engage her audience, as I discussed earlier, following Cutler. To this we will add the subcategory of the use of “we” by the poet to engage her audience.²³ Since Cutler does not mention “we,” it can be suggested that this is a distinctive register that Kāraikkāl Ammaiār brings to early *bhakti* poetry. As I noted earlier, the poet makes use of terms that can be understood to designate “we” (inclusive of speaker and audience); what I include in this category is verses in which the “we” is portrayed as actively engaged in devotion to Śiva, as in the following verse:

Attaining the sacred feet
of the lord with the third eye
who is crowned by the crescent moon,
we ignore the God of death;
in this life we bow, serve, and praise him –
what could touch us?

(“Wonder” v. 69)

Her use of “we” in this instance implies that there is a community of devotees in its aura of certainty that they are saved. It is a community both real and imagined. From her poems, it is clear that stories about Śiva from Sanskrit mythological texts were circulating, for she draws on the collective memory of Śiva that they both record and create; I discuss this in the next section of this chapter, on “the heroic lord.” Some of her descriptions of the Lord seem iconographical, as I discuss in the section on “questions” in this chapter. In her poems, worship of Śiva is a naturalized discourse; her contribution is to create a devotional subjectivity (a “servant”) that encompasses and directs that worship.

The early Pallava dynasty (fourth to sixth centuries CE), which was established in Kanchipuram in the Tamil region several centuries prior to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār and serves as her historical context, is to date not well understood by scholars, and this is not the place to address the many unsettled questions. There are more resources for the study of later Pallavas, including literature, inscriptions, and religious buildings beginning with the reigns of Mahendravarman I (ca. 571–630 CE) and Narasimhavarman I (ca. 630–668 CE).²⁴ The religious patterns that emerge in the Pallava era, including royal gifting of temples and land, the maintenance and performance of worship with images (*pūjā*), and support for the priestly practitioners, relate to the patterns developed during the reign of the Gupta dynasty in north India (fourth to fifth centuries CE).²⁵ Without assuming an easy causality, but acknowledging that the Pallavas looked north for inspiration, we can suggest that the patterns well attested to by Gupta sources were developing elsewhere, including in Tamilnadu and especially at Kancipuram, which by the eighth century had a very sophisticated building program exemplified by the Kailāsanatha Temple (ca. 720) built by Naraimhavarman Rajasimha (r. ca. 680–720) and its answer in Nandivarman Pallavamalla’s (r. ca. 731–96) Vaikuntha Perumal Temple (ca. 770–775).²⁶ James Heitzman has characterized the shift in south Indian ideals of kingship as one from a leader in war to a promoter of proper order (*dharma*):

The kings of the Sangam period were war leaders whose authority rested as much on their ability to embody virile and redistributive qualities as on their limited control over taxes or administration. During the Pallava period the king’s legitimacy rested more and more on the visible patronage of dharma through the support of persons and institutions (usually brahmana communities) that embodied and expressed a paradigmatic, perfected world order . . . The religious world-view promulgated under the Pallavas and the Cholas defined political power as the ability to protect and propagate dharma throughout the world, and the legitimate ruler as the person who most effectively carried out this work. By winning battles and donating to brahmanas and temples, the kings especially set themselves up as the leaders of the dharmic kingdom and potentially as legitimate authorities everywhere.²⁷

What we can suggest is that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār wrote her poetry in the context of the development of these religious, political, and artistic conventions, and her poems in many ways presuppose established worship of Śiva.

During this early period (fourth–fifth centuries CE) courtly life was also developing and, again, there are shared patterns across Indian regions. Daud Ali has recently discussed the overlapping conceptions of lordship in religious and courtly realms:

The evidence for the origin of early medieval religious ideas points ... to significant interaction with the contemporary practices and conceptions of human lordship, and the rise and proliferation of many important ideas in both contexts seems to have been broadly contemporaneous. In fact, religious and political notions of lordship differed more in degree than kind. They formed part of a continuous and homologously structured “chain of being” which linked the entire cosmos.²⁸

Especially interesting for our purposes is that “The various hierarchies which converged on the court all tended towards the single conceptual classification of servant (*sevaka*, *bhṛtya*) and master (*svāmin*).”²⁹ The relationship between the two was, from the perspective of the “servant,” one of loyalty: “But perhaps the most valuable of these qualities for those in royal service, however was loyalty, usually denoted by the terms *bhakti*, ‘devotion,’ or *anurāga*, ‘affection or attachment’.”³⁰ This courtly lens is another through which to view the poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ and her imagination of community. It is reasonable to suggest that she imagined a court of Śiva composed of the devotees, who demonstrated not only loyalty in the courtly sense but love, for which she uses the terms *aṇṇu* and, less frequently, *kāṭal*.

There is, then, a community of people who recognize, and worship, Śiva as God. What Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ does is to embed that collective memory in a devotional subjectivity that emphasizes the presence of Śiva in relation to the “servant.” The “servant” cultivates the relationship through physical practices (including the reciting of her poems, as per the signature verses) and mental discipline. Her poetry describes her own transformation into a servant of Śiva, and her use of “we” to engage the hearer encourages the same *bhakti* transformation of fellow worshipers of Śiva. That this new community or “court” may be realized in the cremation ground where the Lord performs his dance attended by ghouls is a possibility I discuss in the section in this chapter on “the other side.” However, if being at the cremation ground is “service,” then it is form of service that is quite distinctive from the kind of devotional work that the poet emphasizes in the “Wonder” and the “Garland,” which I have discussed here.

The heroic lord

All of the poems of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ present a visual image of Śiva; the vast majority of them contain an allusion to stories describing an action undertaken by the Lord as found in the classical mythological texts in Sanskrit known by the genre *purāṇa* (“that of yore”). Many of the stories in the compendia-like texts are very ancient, perhaps first collected around 1000 BCE and then, much later,

both divine and human. His assistance in both these instances is noble, and his own body is changed as it is transformed into a protective barrier, locking the danger within the Lord's hair and throat. However, neither are included in the Eight Heroic Deeds of Śiva, each of which portrays Śiva as killing someone; it is possible that the list of these eight deeds was being created in Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's own time, if Tirumūlar's *Tirumantiram* is dated contemporaneously.³⁶ The poet thus favors stories that convey the Lord as a protector, and that seem to explain the story behind the actions that mark the Lord's body, over more violent stories that do not involve the permanent marking of the Lord's body.

Out of the group of Eight Heroic Deeds – the stories of which I explain in the notes to my translation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's entire corpus in [Appendix 1](#) – the myth to receive the most citation is the Form (of Śiva) that Destroyed the Triple Cities (Tripurāntaka-Mūrti). In a resonant use of this myth, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār transforms the punishment it describes (Śiva destroyed the Triple Cities with a single flaming arrow) into a warning for those who do not serve Śiva with humility:

We do not know the ways
in which cruel karma will affect us,
but we do know that it will punish
those who do not approach him sincerely,

for with a flaming arrow
he destroyed the itinerant triple cities
belonging to the demons who arrogantly thought,
“we are the most powerful.”

(“Wonder” v. 34)

This poem is in a different register than the ones cited earlier (poison, Gaṅga), in that it actively engages the hearer by its use of “we;” in the other poems, neither the speaker nor the audience is specified. However, all of the poems presume a speaker and an audience, whether or not they are specified, insofar as the verses are spoken and heard (and the signature verses encourage others to recite them). The poems represent three distinctive devotional ways to view Śiva. The poem that describes his darkened neck encourages the hearer to admire the Lord's body: both its deed and its ornaments. The poem on the Gaṅga encourages the hearer to see Śiva's ornaments, some of which are frightening (the fierce cobras, the power of the river), as beautiful. The poem on karma more complexly weaves together the devotee's actions and the Lord's actions. The implication is that if the devotees act arrogantly, as the demons of the myth did, then the Lord, who is the ultimate source of karmic retribution, will punish them. In contrast, if they “approach him sincerely” they will escape such a fate. These poems convey a devotional subjectivity that admires the Lord's power, correctly understands his bodily marks and ornaments as signs of his beneficial power, and approaches him with sincerity.

Other poems also provide a sense of the meanings that one who possesses a devotional subjectivity can make and take from heroic images of Śiva from the *purāṇas*. In the following poem the poet unites three mythological images, one from the Eight Heroic Deeds (Śiva destroys the god of Death), and two from very popular mythological stories though they do not have the status of the Eight Heroic Deeds in tradition (Śiva manifests himself as the fiery *linga*, Śiva crushes the demon-king Rāvaṇa of Lāṅkā), together in a single verse in order to celebrate the power of the Lord's foot:

His revered foot
crushed the powerful many-shouldered giant
 who arrogantly lifted the mountain;
foiled holy Brahma and Viṣṇu
 who wept and then joyfully praised him
 when they could not find his limits;
and kicked Yama, the god of death, into submission.
 (“Wonder” v. 80)

The poet has noticed a detail that forms part of the story in these well-known myths: Śiva used his little toe to crush the demon Rāvaṇa, who had come to Śiva's abode, Mount Kailāsa, to shake the mountain at its foundation; Śiva's feet were not able to be found by Brahma, who dug below the earth to find the source of the fiery *linga*; and Śiva's foot kicked and killed the god of Death, thereby saving a young boy who clung to his *linga*.³⁷ But why has she selected this detail? Read within the context of the "Wonder's" devotional subjectivity – starting with verse 1, which explicitly mentions the Lord's sacred feet, as I discussed earlier – the foot is significant to the devotee: As the lowest part of the Lord's body, it is within reach of the earnest devotee, and its power is salvation. This devotional resonance informs the poet's selection and prioritization of a detail from the Sanskrit myths: The image of the lowest part of the Lord's body as powerful to the devotee is enhanced by the myths' descriptions of its power to defeat the formidable foes of Rāvaṇa and Yama, taming their arrogance, and, in the story of the young boy, to save a devotee from death by such action; in addition, his foot plays a role in a story that demonstrates Śiva's superiority. This poem inscribes the Sanskrit mythology with the *bhakta*'s devotional subjectivity.

As devotee-centered as the poet's perspective is, however, with her emphasis on a Lord who can be approached, loved, worshiped, adored, and attained by a "servant," she also makes it clear that the Lord cannot be contained by the "servant's" devotional subjectivity.

Oh, lord who destroyed
the demons' power
by a single flaming arrow to their triple forts,

hear our persistent pleas
that you ornament yourself
with a necklace of gold
in place of that cobra on your chest.

(“Wonder” v. 27)

The powerful Lord of the Heroic Deed (destroying the triple cities) is here contextualized by a request from the devotee. The poem makes it clear that the Lord has not accepted the suggestion, and yet the devotee(s) feel empowered to persist “over many days” because their devotional perspective is that they have an ongoing relationship with the Lord. This is one of the verses that may encourage us to view the “we” as an “I,” owing to the specificity of the request and the repetition of it over time. Taking it as “we” (inclusive of speaker and audience) embeds the “I” in a group of like-minded persons.

In either case, the speaker desires that the cobra be replaced by a gold necklace. There are several possibilities of interpretation. It may be that the speaker/group would prefer that the Lord wear an ornament made out of a valuable and rare substance, matching the value they place on his own body and essence. It may also be that the speaker/group is concerned that the body of the Lord display emblems that have a positive social resonance, signifying someone of wealth and honor. In a related meaning, it may also be that the speaker/group is concerned that the cobra is too frightening, since elsewhere in her poetry Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ describes the cobra as fierce, swift, and with its head bobbing as though to strike, as in the following:

Though he is adorned with a bobbing cobra
that does not let anyone come near,
along with a garland of skulls and bleached bones,
and he is pleased to ride a fierce bull,
can one doubt that these are no obstacles to love?

(“Garland” v. 17)

In her assertion that the Lord's ornaments and vehicle are no obstacles to the devotee's love, the poet calls attention to the fearsome aspects of his accoutrements. Śiva's appearance can be frightening even to his devotees, who desire to approach him with love; but to the devotee, the poet assures us, it is not an obstacle to love. However, if devotees feel such fear, by extension others could, too. Perhaps the *bhakta*(s) ask the Lord to wear a necklace made of gold instead of a cobra so that those who have not assumed a devotional subjectivity will not be too frightened to do so. I take up the poet's association of the fearful aspect of the Lord, including his forms as a Beggar and a Dancer, with those who would malign

Śiva and his devotees in the section in this chapter on “the other side.” Here we can note that the poet’s remarks on Śiva as one who is fearful both complement and challenge images such as that of the heroic Lord, already discussed, and images of his profound beauty, as in the following comparison between his body and the changing natural light of the heavens:

His rubicund body is as luminous as morning
 his white ash has the brilliance of noon
 his matted locks are the crimson of sunset
 his throat is the black of deepest night.
 (“Wonder” v. 65)

The excess of the Lord beyond human conceptualization can also affect the poet’s use of language. In the following poem she simply does not know which alternative is better, and in this question she suggests the limitations of language:

Oh, incomparable lord
 who bears the bright crescent moon
 atop his matted locks
 and bestows us with grace,
 should I describe your darkened throat
 as night, a rain cloud, or a flawless sapphire?
 (“Wonder” v. 88)

And the poet recognizes that her context is a world controlled by a Lord whose actions, in this case his dance, have more power than her words:

When his feet stamp
 the underworld shakes;

 when his locks whirl
 the heavens vibrate;

 when his armbands revolve
 the cardinal directions shift;

 he knows that this place
 cannot withstand his dance.
 (“Wonder” v. 77)

And yet, her words are what she has to give; she can only really see him through her own devotional subjectivity.

Questions

That Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār asks questions of the Lord, many of them posed directly to him, is itself a form of engagement with the Lord. It is an intellectual engagement that complements the range of emotional responses, including adulation, admiration, fear, and love, that the poet traces in her poetry as human perspectives on God. Questions also indicate that the poet feels she is in the presence of God, and she is a demanding devotee. The most famous precedent for the scenario of a human being questioning God is the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gītā* (ca. 100 CE), which is also the earliest text to thematize and promote *bhakti* overtly, by defining, elaborating, and endorsing *bhakti* as the best religious path on religious, philosophical, and sociological grounds. In Tamil poetry, asking questions of a ruler is a rhetorical strategy employed in some of the Caṅkam *puṛam* ("public") poetry (ca. 100 BCE–250 CE), but asking questions of God is new with Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār in Tamil tradition. Though her questioning mode was emulated by the later poets, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār's concentrated use of questions – they account for more than a third of each of the "Wonder" and the "Garland" – gives her poetry much more of an intellectual focus and feel than the dramatic emotional modes of the three later male poets in Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition. As the poet states in her admonishment of others, her "innermost thoughts" are focused on Śiva:

Is it not easy?
 You poor people lack any knowledge
 and are pitiable, alas;
 it is better to live
 as those whose innermost thoughts
 are on the father whose throat shines,
 our lord who wanders adorned with the cobra.
 ("Wonder" v. 46)

Many of the poems that ask questions lend themselves to philosophical analysis, because the majority of her questions concern understanding the forms of the Lord.³⁸ Although it is clear from the poems cited in the previous section of this discussion that she adores the many forms of the Lord, she is not content with admiration but instead seeks to understand the significance of the Lord's multiplicity of forms. This quest places images from mythology into a philosophical inquiry, and thus her poems must be read as more sophisticated than simply a celebration of mythology.³⁹

Moreover, many of the verses seem to take an iconographical stance towards the mythological images, questioning not so much the why of his heroic deed, but the why of elements on his body. Several of her poems speak of rivalries between elements that share his body, specifically the moon and the cobra; two goddesses, the wife of Śiva and the Gaṅga; and the goddess and Viṣṇu.

That lady
is from an auspicious family
and will not depart;
nor will this aquatic lady.
You who are adorned
 with skulls and white ashes,
since you cannot be separated from them
tell us which of the two blessed with your love is dearest.

("Wonder" v. 95)⁴⁰

“That lady” is Umā, Śiva’s wife, who shares half of his body, which is alluded to in this verse and specifically stated in others (e.g., “Wonder” vv. 39, 47, 50, 51, 58, 59; “Garland” vv. 5, 12). Iconographically, this is the figure of Ardhanariśvara (“half-woman-lord”), a depiction of Śiva in which the right side of his body has male features and the left half has female features; Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār seems to refer to this image, whose iconographic history goes back to the mid-first century CE, in her visual detail in “Wonder” v. 51 of the lady’s “half plait.”⁴¹ The “aquatic” lady is the Gaṅga. On one level, the question that this verse poses – “which of the two blessed with your love is dearest?” – has a very human analogue: Can the Lord equally share his love among many deserving beings – including the *bhaktas* – or does he prioritize? The human *bhaktas* also want to share (a root meaning of “*bhakti*”) in God’s love – is there enough to go around? Viewed in this way, it is a poignant question.

Furthermore, the goddesses have privileged access to the Lord via his body that devotees, who are able to reach only his feet, do not. On this level, the depicted rivalry of the goddesses illustrates the philosophical understanding of Śiva as the union of opposites. The figure of Umā sharing half of his body makes this point, as his body is both male and female. Philosophically understood, both the male principle (*puruṣa*) and the female principle (*prakṛti* or *śakti*) are required for the creation and maintenance of the universe and all of its beings. The verse explores this theme as well by suggesting a contrast between the two goddesses, the one being from a good family, and married in an official (if challenging) wedding ceremony; and the other being a fluid and meandering goddess who is unmarried yet remains bound to Śiva by the twists and turns of his matted locks. The two are “opposites” in rivalry, status, and nature, and yet they are both inextricably united by Śiva’s body.

By extension, that Śiva contains oppositional elements on his body signifies that he comprises all things, from one extreme to the other and everything in the middle. Philosophically speaking, since every discrete thing is Śiva, differences are marginalized by his shared sacred essence. Several of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poems in fact portray Śiva as encompassing all (e.g., "Wonder" vv. 20, 21). This kind of thinking may underlie a poem in which she states that she cannot understand the significance of distinctive names and forms of Śiva:

How shall I call my lord
who crushed the demon king
with a single toe, destroying his pride:
Śiva? Brahma? Viṣṇu?
The meaning of these distinctive forms
eludes me.

(“Wonder” v. 18)

In another poem she seems to answer her own question by locating different forms squarely in the eye of the beholder who has cultivated a devotional subjectivity, and who is contrasted with those who refer only to texts (perhaps even mythological texts):

Let them go around
speaking only superficially
about learned texts;
the true nature of the lord with the sapphire-hued throat
is that he will appear in any form desired
by those whose practice is disciplined.

(“Wonder” v. 33)

It is through the devotee’s practice – experience – that the Lord appears. “Practice” is not specified in this stanza. It can suggest meditation (in which the Lord appears through visualization); it can also suggest that the Lord appears as a result of worship practices that the poet describes in other stanzas; or it can suggest practice that is verbal, such as praising God or posing questions to him. The key is that the practice is disciplined, it is sincere. By this, the poet asserts that, at least in part, the significance of the Lord’s forms is determined by the devotee’s response to the divine. Mythological stories provide images and explanations, but it is the devotee’s practice to a certain form of the Lord that makes it appear; it is made real by the devotee’s emotional and intellectual response to the divine. The devotee knows the Lord by heart, and knowing something by heart (including a text) “. . . becomes timeless. It cannot be consulted, leafed through, put aside and taken up again like a book. It asserts its unmoving presence and ripens in the mind that welcomes it without that mind being aware of the stages of its maturation.”⁴²

Yet, as the poet reveals, not everyone agrees with her emphasis on the devotee’s response:

I became your servant
though I had not seen
your sacred form;
even today, I have not seen it.

So what will I answer
to those who repeatedly ask,
“Which is the form of your lord?”

What exactly is your true form?
(“Wonder” v. 61)

Since the poet describes so many of God's forms in her stanzas, clearly she has "seen" them by "today," so by implication she is here asking to see his true or ultimate form, which may be distinctive from his mythological and mythologically described iconographic forms. Moreover, she is thinking about the "true" form of the Lord in the context of questions posed by others. These others ask about "your" (*num*) Lord, indicating that they are distinct from her (and devotees who may have joined her, since the form is a plural). So while she is emphasizing the Lord through the eyes of the devotee in her verses, others "repeatedly" ask about a "true" form of the Lord that is presumably independent of the devotee. The poet indicates that she is not necessarily interested in this question, since she became his servant without seeing that form, and she remains a servant today. She understands that the Lord's powers include concealing himself, so he need not show anyone anything (e.g., "Wonder" vv. 54, 97), which again has a parallel to the devotees since the poet uses "concealing" to describe the act of devotees holding Śiva in their hearts ("Wonder" v. 96). But still, she is compelled by the pointed questions to address the issue of his ultimate form, which she does.

Would the palm of your hand
become red from the flames dancing in it?

Or would the flames
absorb their color from your beautiful palm?

Oh, lord
who bears bright flames in your palm
as you dance with anklets ringing
on the fire
at the abode of the ghouls,
make your reply to this.

("Wonder" v. 98)

In this poem, she imagines the Dancing Śiva who holds fire in his palm. She knows Śiva as the red god, and throughout her poems describes his beauty through this auspicious ("Śiva" means "auspicious one") and distinctively Indian color on his feet, naturally henna colored, and on his body and matted locks, which are naturally red. The poem uses the commonality of color between the Lord's body and the flames to raise a philosophical question: Is their essence shared? The implied answer is that it is. In the verse prior to this one she calls the Lord a "blazing fire" of destruction (v. 97), and asks if he stores this fire in the universe or in his palm. Both of these examples point to the Lord as the source and master of the elements; as such he is known as Aṣṭamūrti, the "eight forms," which are the eight component elements of the universe (earth, water, wind, fire, ether, sun, moon, stars) and their homologous existence in the microcosm of humankind; this form is explicitly referenced in "Wonder" v. 21.⁴³ Within these eight forms, the poet shows a special preference for light, when she extols his "indescribable

luminosity" (v. 63) and brilliance (vv. 32, 65). He appears in her mind as "a form as bright as lightning" (v. 24); light is his power, beauty, and devotees' enlightened knowledge of him.

The simultaneity of the cosmic and the human-like forms of the Lord that the poet sees in the image of the Dancing Śiva represents a distinctive take on *bhakti*. In its eleventh chapter, the *Bhagavad Gītā* describes God's transformation from a specific, human-like form to a universal, all-encompassing form. In that text, the human seeker Arjuna begs his "charioteer" to show him his universal form; when Kṛṣṇa (Krishna) gives Arjuna a special "divine eye" in order to see his universal form, the destructive power of the ultimate form of the Lord frightens him and he experiences sensory and cognitive overload. Arjuna then begs God to return to his human form, as that is the form to which he can relate. The scene demonstrates that God can take on any form at will, but that he responds to his devotees. For them, he will contain his cosmic power in a human-like form; all of the divine power, including the destructive power, is still there, but the outward form is familiar, accessible, and not fearsome.

For Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, the relationship between God and devotee is at the center. She does not presume to describe the Lord apart from the devotee's perspective – there is no "divine eye." As demonstrated throughout this chapter's discussion, the perspective of a devotee is created and described by her poetry. While she does not claim to understand everything about the Lord (e.g., "Wonder" vv. 18, 28, 43, 59), she refutes a sense of the Lord as "out there," beyond the devotee, in spite of the precedent of the *Gītā* and the pointed questions of outsiders. Therefore, she equates even the "highest" form of the Lord with whatever is desired in the heart of the devotee. In her case, this form is the Dancing Śiva.

If I were to be blessed to behold
the highest form of the lord –

would I stand before him,
clasp my hands in honor,
focus my mind only on him,
and forever experience the bliss
of the lord of the celestials
who dances on the flames?
(“Wonder” v. 85)

She wonders what she would do in the presence of this form, the highest to her. She hopes that she would have the discipline to make a traditional gesture of respect to him and to focus her mind such that she would share the bliss she attributes to the Lord in that form.

That she considers the Dancing Śiva to be the highest form is supported by two consecutive verses in the “Garland” (vv. 14, 15), in which she describes the Lord as dancing at the cremation ground and then asks him why he undertook heroic deeds:

Oh lord who eternally dances
 in that wide cremation ground,
 attended by ghouls singing with powerful voices
 and goblins worshipping your ankleted feet:
 Why did you fire a single arrow from your bow,
 incinerating your enemies' triple citadels?
 ("Garland" v. 15)

It is as though the Dancer is a superior appearance, able to answer the question of why other forms, including Śiva who Destroyed the Triple Cities (v. 15) and Śiva who Crushed Rāvaṇa (v. 14), acted in the way that they did. Intriguingly, stories of Śiva's dance pervade the Sanskrit *purāṇas*: He dances when he defeats the demon Andhaka, he dances when he conquers and skins the elephant demon (both are two of his Eight Heroic Deeds), and in many of his other stories.⁴⁴ However, there was no developed story of the Dance of Śiva for Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār to index, in no small part because the dance *qua* dance was not represented as one of Śiva's heroic deeds, much less one of his Eight Heroic Deeds, in the traditional Sanskrit epic and mythological literature; in that literature, it is characteristic that Śiva dances after he performs a heroic deed. However, Tirumūlar's *Tirumantiram*, which, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, is dated by some scholars contemporaneously with Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, did discuss the dance in detail, devoting the eighth chapter of its ninth and concluding section (called "tantras" in the text) to an articulation of Śiva's five dances (Bliss, Beauty, Golden, Golden Tillai, Wonder), thus raising the dance to the highest mystical level in its own right.⁴⁵ Perhaps contemporaneously with Tirumūlar, or perhaps earlier than him, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār suggested that Śiva as the Dancer was a distinctive manifestation of the Lord, and one that was superior to, and not just an element in the story of, Śiva's mythological deeds, such as those described as the Eight Heroic Deeds and other popular stories. She played a role in creating the Dancing Śiva as an autonomous image that has meaning to devotees. She claims not that she understands his entirety, but that she can relate to him in that form:

His fullness is unknown to anyone,
 yet we can glimpse our lord's design
 when he joyfully dances on the flames
 adorned with skulls
 and accompanied by grim ghouls
 in the middle of the night.
 ("Wonder" v. 30)

Tirumūlar provides a yogic view of Śiva's dance; this is distinct from the devotional perspective on the dance by a later Śiva-*bhakti* poet-saint (ca. eighth

century), Māṇikkavācakar.⁴⁶ This division is mirrored in Sanskrit mythological representations of the dance. For example, the *Liṅga Purāṇam* describes the creation of Kālī from the darkness of Śiva's poisoned throat so that she would defeat the demon Dārūka; to quell her rage when it becomes excessive, Śiva appears as a young boy and then subsequently dances with her. This story concludes by contrasting its perspective, which is devotional in the sense that Kālī is subject to Śiva (I discuss the battlefield aspects of the story later in this chapter), with a yoga perspective: "Thus you have heard in brief the story of the Tāṇḍava dance of the trident-bearing god. There are others, however, who hold that the dance of the lord is really the bliss of Yoga."⁴⁷ The yogic perspective on the dance is represented in the *Kūrma Purāṇa*, which portrays Śiva as the master yogin (one accomplished in yoga) who discourses about yoga and then dances, which is witnessed only by those versed in yoga: "They saw that lord of creatures who is really known only by those *yogins* who have mastered the principles of Yoga."⁴⁸ Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's profession of a deep desire to *see* Śiva as the Dancer ("Wonder" v. 85) resonates with both the yogic and devotional perspectives on Śiva's cosmic dance, weaving them together in her distinctive creation of a devotional subjectivity.

The other side

The "Wonder" contains several verses that seem to preserve what can be interpreted as the poet's feeling that Śiva, and her love for him, is being challenged by others. In these verses, she asks the Lord to change his appearance or behavior into something more conventional and less frightening ("Wonder" vv. 27, 43, 57), or she indicates an alternative, disapproving gaze ("Wonder" vv. 29, 31, 33, 40, 56, 57, 61, 82, 91); in one verse she does both ("Wonder" v. 57). This is one sense of "the other side": The poet's indication that she faces challenges to Śaivism. When a reason for the onlooker's disapproval is specified, it has to do with the appearance of the Lord: His ornaments of cobra and skulls make a negative impression ("Wonder" vv. 27, 31; "Garland" vv. 4, 17); his appearance to devotees rather than textualists ("Wonder" v. 33); he has too many forms ("Wonder" v. 61); or his form as a Beggar disturbs others, which in turn makes it an issue for devotees ("Wonder" vv. 25, 43, 56, 57). The majority of these verses suggest that the Lord's frightful appearance as a Beggar whose skin is smeared with sacred white ash, whose body is ornamented with a cobra and a garland of bones, and who wanders about carrying a skull in which to secure alms is a locus of criticism by others.

Who is making such criticisms? Mythological stories portray Śiva as a union of opposites in social terms as well as philosophical ones, using a chain of associations: He is both husband and renouncer, erotic and ascetic, reproducer and abstainer, social and antisocial. As an ascetic, he wears the cobra and skulls as ornaments, which frighten others, including the gods, especially at his own wedding to Pārvaṭī, when he arrives in the ascetic's guise accompanied by a band of ghouls and goblins. His ornaments may be appropriate for an ascetic, since this

disciplined character cares nothing for social appearances or values.⁴⁹ Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is selective in her interpretation of Śiva as the ascetic: Her Beggar wanders all around, begging from women (literally, “simple people,” vv. 57, 74) and is observed by many – some with disapproval – as though he were in a village setting, and not a forest of brahmins or a gathering of gods. Also, the poet speaks to the Beggar herself, which takes God out of the mythological setting and into her presence. Echoing verse 27, discussed earlier, the poet asks:

Whenever you wander
begging across this world,
see that you remove
the menacing cobra you bear

or else chaste women,
fearful of live venomous
ornament bobbing on your head,
will not offer alms.

(“Wonder” v. 57)

The chaste women are devotees enough to feed a wandering ascetic, but even they will become frightened by his appearance. How much more so will those who are not devotees of Śiva, for his frightful form is all they can see:

All those who do not understand
the lord's true meaning reject him:
They cannot see his embodiment
as a ghoulish wearing skulls
to be his beautiful body
adorned with sacred ash.

(“Wonder” v. 29)

Those who neither understand nor accept the Lord cannot have a valid perspective on him, which is illustrated by their failure to see beauty in any of the forms of embodiment he chooses, including that of a “ghoul” (*pēy*).⁵⁰ In contrast, the devotee homologizes his frightful form with his body resplendent with sacred ash (which is specifically designated as beautiful in “Wonder” vv. 56, 65, though she commonly describes him as covered with ash: e.g., “Wonder” vv. 7, 59, 95; “Garland” v. 20). This contrast between his beautiful and frightful forms is a motif in her poetry (e.g., “Wonder” vv. 13, 27, 31, 43, 51, 56, 57, 58). It is Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār who embraces the frightful forms of the Lord and, in so doing, suggests that this is one of the real challenges of being a devotee; furthermore, as a challenge, it is central to the definition of being a devotee. If we recall that a key element of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār's *bhakti* is to keep God actively in one's mind and heart – in the present and in the presence – then we can see that a frightful form, which challenges the mind, may even be of more value than a beautiful

image that the mind and heart can assimilate easily. Kāraikkāl Ammaiār is obviously a pre-modern poet, and yet her view of *bhakti* has resonance with modernist approaches to art, in which the creation of an image that disturbs the viewer is more valuable than a classically beautiful one, because it makes the mind work to relate to it (for example, Picasso described his work in this manner). This is not to say that such images are not “beautiful,” only that they have a different beauty; their beauty is in challenging the mind so that it engages rather than assimilates. In terms of aesthetics, the excess of the beautiful itself gives rise to the disgusting.⁵¹

The poet links the Beggar with the Dancer, recalling the myth of the Pine Forest:

Without explanation
our lord wanders everywhere
begging for sundry offerings,
then dances in the cremation ground
in the deepest night;

we want to know why he does this,
but what can we say now?
Should we see him one day
we shall ask him.

(“Wonder” v. 25)

Yet, unlike the Pine Forest myth, the poet does not eroticize the dance.⁵² Instead, she emphasizes its fearsomeness:

Please do not bring your beautiful wife
gracefully adorned with plait and bangles
to the cremation ground
when you vigorously dance on the flames
accompanied by ghouls
at midnight,
your anklets resounding.

(“Wonder” v. 51)

He dances only amongst his ghouls, on the flames of the pyres at the cremation ground at midnight: His wife, and the beauty she represents, is banished. The ghouls (*pēy*) are Śiva’s attendants in classical mythology, where they are called his *bhūta* in Sanskrit, which is “a close synonym for Tamil *pēy*.”⁵³ Kāraikkāl Ammaiār tells us that she has joined this group of ghouls:

Should I obtain a blessed view
 of his highest form,
 I would not wish for anything else
 even if I was entitled;
 the lord with the third eye
 has granted me some knowledge
 and I have joined his loyal band of ghouls.
 ("Wonder" v. 86)

This verse should probably not be taken alone, but with its preceding verse ("Wonder" v. 85), which I discussed earlier in this chapter, and my translation here inscribes the connection. Technically, the Tamil in this verse says only "should I obtain this," leaving the desideratum unspecified. As I noted in my discussion of the preceding verse, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār desires to see Śiva in his highest form, and there is reason to believe that she associates the Dancer with that highest form ("Wonder" v. 85). Interpreting this verse as an "answer" to the one that precedes it is also complicated by the fact that the subject switches from "I" in v. 85 to "we" in v. 86, a feature of the text I discussed earlier. However, given that she clearly describes the ghouls as attendants of Śiva's dance in both the "Wonder" (vv. 30, 51, 78, 98, 99) and the "Garland" (v. 15), "joining his loyal band of ghouls" can reasonably be interpreted as joining them at the scene of the Lord's dance.

A complicating factor is that she says that she (and possibly others) has become a ghoulish owing to understanding that the Lord has granted to her (again emphasizing the intellectual), but she indicates that she has not achieved the ultimate vision yet. In another verse she again associates the Dancing Śiva with her greatest desire, this time nuancing her request to see the place (*iṭam* is the term used in the verse) where he dances:

This is our greatest desire:
 Would he not grant it?
 Our father, show us one day
 the place where you forever
 dance on the fire
 in deep night,
 the twists of your matted locks
 extending like flames.
 ("Wonder" v. 70)

I join many interpreters, including her biographer Cēkkiḷār, in viewing this stanza as a link to her "Decades" hymns, which are set in the "place" where the Lord dances, the cremation ground. Note, though, that her expressed desire to see the place where the Lord dances is not the culmination of her "Wonder"

poem, which continues on for another fifteen verses that explore all of the themes that I have identified with respect to her poetry. So, the verse provides a link to her “Decades” verses, but at the same time its location in the “Wonder” underscores the point that there are differences. First and foremost, the sense of place in the “Wonder” and the “Garland” is the poet’s mind or heart, which she appeals to many times, either implicitly or explicitly. Other instances of place in these poems include the Lord’s body; the wide world, including nature imagery and implicit references to villages; and the earth and heavens. Among the Lord’s forms, only his manifestation as Dancer is located in a specific place, the cremation ground (the Triple Cities are mentioned, but this place is “other,” destroyed by the heroic Lord). In contrast, the “Decades” focus exclusively on the cremation ground where the Lord performs his dance, providing elaborate descriptions of the flora, fauna, and ghoulish inhabitants of the place. Such descriptions occupy much of the verses; there are a few intriguing details provided about the Lord’s body and his dance, but overall the Lord and his dance serve as a refrain for the verses, and so the cremation ground has pride of place as a developed theme in the “Decades.”

The poet’s concentration in the “Decades” on the cremation ground as a place set apart from human habitation provides another nuance to the meanings of “the other side.”

Agitated and unable to comprehend,
they bear the dead in biers
to the cremation ground
and perform the rites then light the pyres
which glow in the evening.

Thus illuminated,
dancing his cosmic dance
to the beat of celestial drums,
his anklets resounding in all directions,
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

(“Decade-1” v. 10)

And yet it is a very human place, defined by society as the place for proper disposal of the dead, where bodies are cremated (with overtones of the fire burning up their accumulated karma) through “rites and pyres.” But it is a place where no one wants to spend time, “unable to comprehend” death and “agitated” by that lack of knowledge and its attendant fears, as well as the sadness of losing a loved one. No one would choose to stay there. If the ghouls (*pēy*) are understood to be malevolent spirits of the dead, which is a meaning of the term in Tamil today, then they are consigned to live there.⁵⁴ Before Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s time, in the Caṅkam-era poetry, the term suggested creatures who would consume the flesh of the charred human bodies at the cremation ground. For example, one of the poems

from the *Puranānūru* includes the following description:

Even the rulers of countries go to the burning ground
 where the land is waste and desolate and filled with dry thorns,
 and owls are there with blazing mouths and undulating shrieks,
 and small foxes, their glistening teeth smeared with fat,
 chew at corpses; where demonesses, gasping and embracing the dead,
 dance swinging their legs on that salty land in terrifying movement
 by the light of the pyres, their bodies sending out the stench
 of hot meat because they have consumed the bloodless flesh.
 And that day will come when you must go there as well,
 but your bad reputation will remain, and your good reputation.⁵⁵

In the Caṅkam poet's portrait the cremation ground is a fearful place, but its significance is put in terms of human society – one's reputation, which is remembered long after the trauma of one's relatives' confrontation with death and the horrors of the cremation ground. The "demonesses" are female *pēy*, but this translation erases the very human connotations of the term, both in its connection with the cremation ground where human bodies are disposed and in the terminology used elsewhere in the Caṅkam poems, which encodes the term with human meanings; this is why I prefer to render the term as "ghoul," or "one who delights in the morbid."⁵⁶

As scholars have noticed, some of the descriptions in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's poetry, such as this one, bear a striking resemblance to poems from the earlier Tamil Caṅkam corpus, making it more than likely that she drew many elements from those poems for use in her "Decades."⁵⁷ Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār assuredly draws on the Caṅkam tradition of poetry, but she changes it. In her representation, she and the ghouls choose to live in the cremation ground because the Lord has chosen to dance there. The Lord claims the cremation ground, a place that is uncontested by ordinary human desire; his choice is emblematic of his status as the cosmic Lord, master of all beings and even time itself (see "Wonder" v. 5). In imagining Śiva as Lord at the cremation ground, the poet also draws on Sanskrit mythology found in the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh.*) and elsewhere:

His abode was the burning ground, which was "covered with hair and bones, full of skulls and heads, thick with vultures and jackals, covered with a hundred funeral pyres, an unclean place covered with flesh, a mire of marrow and blood, scattered piles of flesh, resounding with the cries of jackals" (*MBh.* 13.128.13–15). Indeed, in his wandering all over the earth, the Great God had always been in search of a hallowed spot. "There is nothing purer than a cremation ground," Śiva declared (*MBh.* 13.128.16). The hosts of the ghostly beings that are his companions loved to dwell there, and Śiva did not like to stay anywhere without them (*MBh.* 13.128.18).⁵⁸

As with her treatment of other Sanskritic myths in her other poems, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār creates an intertextuality between Tamil and Sanskrit sources in her

imaginative tracing of a devotional subjectivity that is her own but that she also defines so that it can be embodied by others who desire to become a servant. When we turn to the “Decades” we can see that, as with the Sanskrit myths, Śiva makes his home in the “pure” cremation ground, but the way the cremation ground appears is in keeping with the descriptions found in Tamil Caṅkam poetry. The question to ask about the “Decades” is: How is her devotional subjectivity expressed in the “Decades” when she nowhere refers to herself beyond the signature line, in contrast to her use of “I,” including her appeals to her own heart and mind, in “Wonder” and “Garland”? Significantly, by the eleventh century tradition understood that the poet did make a direct reference to herself in the “Decades”: The description of a female ghoul in “Decade-1” verse 1 was taken to be a self-portrait and was rendered in bronze images such as the stunning image now housed in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri.⁵⁹ However, the poet’s use of the third person to describe the female ghoul in “Decade-1” verse 1 is striking in this regard, and should give us pause.

The idea that the verse could serve as a self-description, even one once removed (including the suggestion that, if this is not an actual description of her, it might as well be, since she has “joined the ghouls”), is challenged by two factors. One is that, as noted earlier, the motif of female ghouls who consumed corpses on the battlefield and in the cremation ground was an established one in Caṅkam poetry, so that the first verse of “Decade-1” lacks the singularity we associate with a self-portrait.⁶⁰ The other is the behavior of the ghouls, which becomes noticeable when one reads the verse in its context. The verse following the description of the female ghoul portrays the erratic behavior of what seems to be this same female ghoul.⁶¹

Sitting amidst thorny shrubs,
she pulls a charred stick from the fire,
breaks it and draws, laughing harshly.
Her gaze is furtive, like a frightened animal;
suddenly she jumps up,
singes herself in the searing fire
that consumes corpses,
and angrily tosses ashes to quell the flames.

Dancing here, our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.
 (“Decade-1” v. 2)

Throughout both “Decades” the ghouls are involved in their own macabre activities, hardly paying attention at all to the Dancing Śiva: They fight, dance their own dance (*tuṇaṅkai*, “Decade-1” v. 7 and “Decade-2” v. 2), and are always in search of corpses on which to feast. Only two verses describe them as engaged with the Lord’s dance, when they “beat drums and sing while the beautiful lord dances” and act as a chorus that “sounds like a flute to accompany” the dance (“Decade-2” vv. 1, 6).

In Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poetic portrayal, Śiva's ghoulish host, drawn from Sanskrit mythology and described through images from Tamil literature and the folklore elements it includes, are pure id, at the mercy of their instincts. They claw at bodies; they dance a vigorous, elbow-slapping folk dance; they dash around grunting and howling. Most significantly, the ghouls are only minimally represented in the "Decades" as having language. The poet attributes only three words to them, *ataṇai munṇē kaṇṭilōm* ("why didn't we see it first"; "Decade-1" v. 4), which they speak (or think) angrily, full of rage that a fox beat them to the remainder of the consecrated food. Other verses also connect the ghouls with animals ("Decade-1" vv. 6, 11). Their accompaniment to Śiva's dance is noise; "Decade-2" verse 10 suggests that the ghouls grunt as a kind of music, making the sound "*ko!*," which is a non-human sound that in another verse is represented as the sound of bamboo bursting ("Decade-2" v. 8), although other verses describe their sound as song.⁶² In contrast, the poet speaks her verses in pure Tamil ("Decade-1" v. 11); she is capable of articulated speech, to which she herself calls attention in the very first verse of the "Wonder." Thus, her portrait of the ghouls at the cremation ground is very much in contrast to her description of a devotional subjectivity in the "Wonder" and the "Garland." As we will see, her biographer Cēkkiḷār, finding the connection and possible identity between Kāraikkāl Ammaiār as a ghoul and Śiva's ill-mannered host distasteful, erased it completely.

Did Kāraikkāl Ammaiār imagine herself to be a ghoul such as this? Her stated desire is to see the highest form of the Lord, and there is evidence that she imagined the Dancing Śiva to be that highest form. From mythology, Śiva's dance is attended by ghouls who make up his host; thus, if one wants to watch Śiva's dance, one would join that host, which could mean joining the group while not necessarily taking on the physical characteristics of the members of the group. Identifying with that desire, and with those who achieve it, does not necessarily require becoming a ghoul – her signature verses notwithstanding – but it does mean joining them.⁶³ The "Decades" read as the eyewitness account of an observer who has an eye that is gifted for detail – a poet. That Kāraikkāl Ammaiār draws on the Tamil Caṅkam poetry links her identity to past, named authors in Tamil tradition. First and foremost, she is saying "I am a poet."⁶⁴ The difference between her and the ghouls is that she consistently notices the Lord's dance, which she praises in each of her "Decades" verses. If we take it, giving much priority to her signature verses, that she has "become" a *pēy*, she may be using that term in a distinctive way: She observes the scene at the cremation ground as a poet who has consciously cultivated her devotional subjectivity, which may be her specific meaning of *pēy* in her signature.

In the "Decades," a demonstration of the cultivated devotional subjectivity is to confront the disgust one feels for the place the Lord has made his home. In adopting a rhetorical strategy of "eyewitness observer" the poet puts herself – and the presumed but undetermined audience – in the midst of the cremation ground, evoking an experience of disgust and revulsion.

On ground moistened by melted fat,
pēy of hollowed eyes and long teeth
 violently dance the *tunāṅkai* around the burning ground;
 when they see the pyres have extinguished
 they crowd to gorge gleefully on the corpses
 to their hearts' content.

Here in this frightful burning ground,
 bearing fire in his palm,
 the beautiful lord dances.

("Decade-2" v. 2)

The observer has to overcome her disgust in order to stay and watch Śiva's dance. The cremation ground is the antithesis of constructed, beautiful space for worship; it is wild, uninhabited by humankind and full of lurking predators, but the Lord who dances there is beautiful. The poet's description of the cremation ground, and her allusions to it in her other poems through her descriptions of Śiva's ornaments as bones or skulls, suggest the abject, which is an existential challenge insofar as it forces the subject to confront her abhorrence and rejection of her own death (e.g., feces, on a quotidian level; death on an ultimate level), a confrontation that "disturbs identity, system, order."⁶⁵ Through engagement with the frightful appearance of the Lord, consciousness is "othered," as it is no longer concerned to uphold conventional boundaries between subject and object, beauty and repulsion, life and death, purity and pollution. The cremation ground serves as an apt theatre since society views it as beyond the pale of human desire, and so it is uncontested.⁶⁶ To locate desire in that repulsive milieu, and to fulfill it by engaging with the beauty of the Lord in that midst, instantiates the *bhakta*'s deep commitment to commune with the divine.

Rather than a self-portrait, the description of the female ghoul in "Decade-1" could serve as an image of the abject: specifically, a female image that is linked to the maternal ("Decade-1" vv. 1, 2, 5). At the site of the real (divine, truth), the speaking subject can reconnect with the maternal subject it had to reject to achieve its own maturation.⁶⁷ Confronting, and being confronted by, the conditions of one's birth, death, selfhood, and subjectivity constitute the experience at the cremation ground. Ultimately, what allows one both to stay there with the Lord and to speak of it is one's commitment to a devotional subjectivity.

The female ghoul in "Decade-1" also offers another interpretive possibility. As we saw earlier, mythological texts such as the *Mahābhārata* frequently represented Śiva in his frightful form at the cremation ground, attended by a host of *bhūtas* (for which the term *pēy* is used in Tamil). He lived there as hallowed ground. The gender of his ghostly followers is not necessarily specified, but if the subject was raised they would undoubtedly be assumed to be male.⁶⁸ By drawing on Tamil Caṅkam poetry to describe a female ghoul, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār unambiguously asserts that at least some members of Śiva's host are female; if the poet is female, then it serves as a justification that she herself has joined Śiva's loyal

entourage at his court, the cremation ground. So, in her description, she is saying not only “I am a poet” but also “I am a member of Śiva’s entourage” who voluntarily lives at the cremation ground in order to watch his dance. That the poet emphasizes his dance at the cremation ground is a topic I will take up momentarily.

Whether or not Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār actually travels to a physical place to observe this dance is ambiguous. In a conventional reading of her poetry, the “Decade” that mentions Tiruvālaṅkāṭu by name is read first – the biographer Cēkkiḷār ensured this reading by labeling this set of verses *mūttu* or “original” – thereby contextualizing the other “Decade,” which describes a cremation ground as the site of Śiva’s dance without mentioning a place-name. Taken alone, “Decade-2” can read as though it is a vision in the poet’s mind, an imaginary. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s imagination of the cremation ground is distinctive from other Tamil literary imaginations of it and, as such, while the nature of the cremation ground is universally portrayed as uncontested by human desire, in terms of literary representation it was indeed a contested place.

The early grammar *Tolkāppiyam*, which describes categories appropriate to the *akam* (“interior”) and *puram* (“exterior”) Caṅkam poetry, locates the cremation ground within the theme of *kāñci* in the *puram* genre. Specifically, this theme describes “the ephemeral nature of earthly existence,” and it is to be rendered through twenty subthemes. Two of the subthemes include that of a wounded warrior surrounded by ghouls (*pēy*) because there is no kin to protect him, and that of a loving wife protecting her wounded husband on the battlefield from such ghouls. Other subthemes relate to the suffering of the kin, including a mother traveling to the battleground to find her dead son (as in the poem by Auvaiṃyār that I discussed in Chapter 1) and, lastly, “*kāṭuvāḷuttu*, the glorification of the graveyard that perpetually impresses upon the people of this wide world the impermanence of the lives of men and its own [graveyard’s] permanence.”⁶⁹ The cremation ground is one instance of the *pālai* or wild and uninhabited (these are also meanings of *kāṭu*, a term used in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s poetry to denote the cremation ground) landscape that the Caṅkam poetry uses to evoke these themes.

Two Tamil religious authors explored the theme of the cremation ground as a signifier of human impermanence in their sixth-century works: Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār in her poetry and Cāttaṇār in his Buddhist epic *Māṇimēkalai* (“The Jeweled Belt”). As they may well have been written contemporaneously, the texts are probably not directly responding to each other, but rather independently developing religious interpretations of earlier texts. The *Māṇimēkalai* self-consciously relates itself to the *Cilappatikāram* and to Caṅkam poetry. As Paula Richman has eloquently discussed, in the epic, an early scene at the cremation ground provides an opportunity for a Buddhist teaching on the centrality of the principle of impermanence to correct understanding of the human condition.⁷⁰ Through the use of elements associated with the *pālai* landscape, such as thorny plants and predatory birds, along with elements specific to the cremation ground, especially the graphic description of a dismembered female corpse, Cāttaṇār transforms the Caṅkam poetry’s concern with love in its sexual and kinship versions into a cautionary lesson that recharacterizes such affinities as needless attachments that need

to be renounced. Indeed, the “interior” poetry’s theme that is “parallel” to the *kāñci* theme in the “exterior” poetry is *peruntīnai* or “abnormal sexual passion,” signifying an excess of passion or lust. The eponymous heroine of the epic is the daughter of a courtesan, so, in turning from that profession, no matter how refined her interpretation of it, she also undermines the excess described by that *Caṅkam* theme.

Moreover, the epic defines the cremation ground as a locus of cosmic significance: It portrays a goddess as explaining to the heroine that ordinary people view the cremation ground simply as a place where bodies are disposed, but in reality, as viewed by the knowledgeable few, it is “the place of the cosmos,” a place that holds the key to understanding the true nature of the world. And the heroine does come away with such knowledge:

Through her contemplation of the cremation ground as described by the goddess, *Māṇimēkalai* attains knowledge of the nature of existence for those living beings who continue to undergo rebirth: lines 206–08 report, “*Māṇimēkalai*, her heart sorrowful and drained [after hearing ‘The Story of the Cosmic Place’] commented on the nature of those who are born.” The story revealed to her the fate of sentient beings to remain in the realm of *saṃsāra* [the cycle of rebirth].⁷¹

Thus, in the *Māṇimēkalai* epic, the cremation ground is a place to gain the Buddhist religious knowledge that everything is impermanent.

*Kāraikkāl Ammai*yār also develops themes of impermanence and disgust, as I discussed earlier, but clearly her theistic vision distinguishes her view of the cremation ground from that of the *Māṇimēkalai* epic. The cremation ground is the place to know God – all of God, not just the easy assimilation of his beauty. Maintaining a relationship with God in the midst of the frightful and repulsive place he chooses to inhabit is a gauge of the maturity of one’s devotional subjectivity. Such a subjectivity is built up over a number of participatory actions she describes in her poetry, including service, asking questions, and praise of the deity through poetry. Through language and action, one’s love increases such that it overflows: This is the excess of spiritual love as a natural and then cultivated development, rather than the “abnormality” of lust. If the devotional subject is able to remain at the cremation ground she will gain knowledge of the Lord as the eternal beauty at the center of the world of mortality, the master who purposefully orchestrates the human cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. Moreover, the Lord has the power to relieve his devotees of such cycles and their concomitant sorrows. The Lord alone is the eternal, permanent agent of the impermanence experienced by mortals.

In *Kāraikkāl Ammai*yār’s “Decade-1,” the cremation ground is not only a cosmic place, it is a named one. In keeping with “exterior” (*puram*) *Caṅkam* poetry and the epics, her poetry contains references to named Tamil towns: *Kāraikkāl* is mentioned in her three signature verses, and *Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu* is mentioned in the refrain of ten verses in “Decade-1” (I discuss complications with taking the latter as a place-name later). When a place is used in a person’s name, or in a phrase that

functions as a person's name, such as in a signature verse, it indicates the place from which a person hails, which explains later texts' portrayal of Kāraikkāl as the poet's birthplace. Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu is presented in her poetry as the place where she observes Śiva's dance. Today, these two towns are some 300 kilometers apart.⁷² Kāraikkāl is not thematized in her poetry, so we will leave this aside and focus on Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Why did Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār locate the cremation ground at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu? R. Mahalakshmi has offered an historical argument to explain it. Her thesis is that the poet made this choice in order to marginalize local cults:

The specific focus here is on the deliberate attempts under the guise of *bhakti* to a single deity – Śiva – at marginalizing and even ignoring the other already existing local traditions in the Tamil region. The work of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, one of the earliest proponents of *bhakti*, will be examined in this connection. While it is well documented that the marginalization of local cults was never final ... it is Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's particular choice of a site known to be associated with an indigenous goddess that has led to this exploration.⁷³

Basically, her argument is that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār imposed Sanskrit-influenced *bhakti* on Tamil goddess traditions, erasing them. As the site of a story of a local goddess that does not find mention in the work of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu is included in Mahalakshmi's argument.

I agree with Mahalakshmi that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār does not focus on Tamil goddesses in her poetry, but I would like to problematize her suggestion that the poet is akin to an oppressor. Part of Mahalakshmi's argument is that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's description of the ghouls (she calls them "demonnenses") draws explicitly on Caṅkam poetry that specifically relates to a Tamil goddess, Korṟavai, but the poet leaves out reference to the goddess in her use of such imagery.⁷⁴ This seems to be true, but there are some complicating factors. One is that, as in the excerpt from the Caṅkam poem I cited above ("Even the rulers of countries go to the burning ground"), the Caṅkam poetry itself does not always cite Korṟavai directly, but instead uses images associated with her within its own interpretations; in the excerpt cited, the main theme is the human concern with reputation. Another is that her argument tends to overlook that Korṟavai and other Tamil goddesses were already assimilated to the Sanskritic Śaiva identities of the goddess in the *Cilappatikāram*, as the following description, purportedly an oracle's praise of the goddess Aiyai, makes clear:

The goddess wore the silver petal of the moon
On her head. From her split forehead blazed
An unwinking eye: her lips were coral,
Bright as silver her teeth, and dark
With poison was her throat. Whirling the fiery serpent

As a bowstring, she bent Mount Meru
 As a bow. Her breasts smothered
 Inside a bodice the venomous fangs of a snake.
 In her hand, piled with bangles, she bore
 A trident. A robe of elephantskin covered her
 And over it, as Aṇaṅku, a girdle of tigerskin.
 Her radiant, left foot clasped a tinkling
 Anklet, a heroic anklet her right.
 She is Korṛavai of the triumphant sword
 Who stood on the head of the broad-shouldered demon
 With two bodies. She is the goddess
 Adored by many as Amari, Kumari,
 Gaurī, Samarī, the one with the trident,
 The blue one, Viṣṇu's younger sister,
 Aiyai, the red one, Durgā
 On the leaping stag with a sword in her large hand,
 Lakṣmī with a fine bracelet, Sarasvatī,
 The goddess of learning, the woman shining
 With rare gems, the ever-young virgin
 robed in the vesture of Kumari whom her kinsmen,
 Viṣṇu and Brahmā, came to adore.⁷⁵

Yet another complicating factor is that, if, as Mahalakshmi suggests, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār draws on the description of a female ghoul in a late Caṅkam poem, the *Tirumurukkāṛruppaṭai* ("Guide to Lord Murukaṅ"), then the poet does not mention the Tamil god Murukaṅ, to whom that entire poem is directed, either; and so the poet excludes more than just goddesses in her interpretive selection.⁷⁶

Also problematic is Mahalakshmi's use of the story of Nīli to support her interpretation. For this story, and its connection to Korṛavai as well as Śiva and the goddess Kālī's dances, Mahalakshmi relies on the modern telling of the story in the legends associated with the temple at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu.⁷⁷ However, the story has a long history of development, and so its details cannot be read back into earlier sources; there is the real possibility that the association of the Nīli story with Tiruvālaṅkāṭu was not unambiguously made until late medieval times, for earlier references to the Nīli story are ambiguous on this point.⁷⁸ And so it cannot be suggested that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is purposefully marginalizing the story of Nīli in locating her vision of Śiva's dance at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu.

More relevant is the connection between Śiva's dance and Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. Intriguingly, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is not the only early author to make this connection. In his section on "Darshan [viewing] of the Holy Dance," Tirumūlar, in his *Tirumantiram*, specifies multiple dances and locations at which they are performed:

Kodukkotti, Pandarangam, Kodu, Samharam
 and others,
 – These Eight dances He danced,
 The Five dances too He danced,
 All these you witness in the Nadis (Adharas) six;
 In the yogic way;
 He danced too in the forests of Deva-daru,
 And in Tillai and in Alavanam
 – He is the king supreme.⁷⁹

“Ālavanam” is the translator’s rendering of “vaṭamuṇṇa māvaṇa maṇṇavan,” or “the forest full of banyan trees”; he connects it to Tiruvālaṅkāṭu because that name literally means “the uncultivated place (*kāṭu*) of banyan trees (*āl* or *ālam*).” Traditionally, many places were designated by elements in their landscape; for example, Tillai, the traditional name for Chidambaram, indicates a kind of dense shrub. Caṅkam poetry revolved around the five landscapes (hills, forest, countryside, seashore, wasteland) and their human associations (lover’s union; waiting or domesticity; unfaithfulness; separation; elopement or hardship).⁸⁰ In resonance with this tradition, Tirumūlar connects Śiva’s dance to wild, uncultivated places, such as the forest of pines (*devadar* or *deodar*, an evergreen native to the Himālayas), an association known from Sanskrit mythology; and the shrub of tillai,

which grows in tangled masses on the banks of the backwater channels of the area, produces beautiful flowers but is a formidable challenge for humans, not only because of its tangled and impassable stocks, but also because the milk-bark of its broken branches is poisonous.⁸¹

Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṛ joins Tirumūlar in placing the dance at the forest of banyan trees, whose multiple branches grow downwards such that one tree itself can create a “forest.”

In theory, neither Tirumūlar nor Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṛ necessarily had to be referring to a named Tamil town; they could have been referring simply to “a sacred forest of banyan trees” (*tiru ālaṅkāṭu*). However, evidence suggests that the legend of Śiva’s dance found in both authors relatively quickly became associated with a town named Tiruvālaṅkāṭu in northern Tamilnadu. Although there were traditions in north India that represented Śiva as a dancer – for example, episodes in many mythological texts as well as Gupta-period fifth-century sculptures in Sakore, Madhya Pradesh, and Sirpur, among other places⁸² – it is south India that individualized the dance as in and of itself significant to create the Dancing Śiva. As Zvelebil notes, there are many mentions of dance in early Tamil literature:

In the far South, there are indications that divine dance, and dance in cultus, were very important in early Dravidian religion. There is also a rather

important literary evidence for Śiva's dance from late Sangam or early post-Sangam literature: the Invocation to *Kalittokai* (c. 4th–5th century AD) ascribed to Nallantuvanār mentions a number of Śiva's dances connected with the myth of the destruction of Tripura. It is clear that the Tamil South had an important *independent tradition of a dancing god* which began to fully flourish and develop during the Pallavas of Kāñci and reached its apogee and the established canonic form during the Cōlas.⁸³

In a pattern familiar to historians of religions, the Tamils took an image that played a supporting role in Sanskritic literature and, in the context of their own traditions of poetry and religion, centralized it and greatly developed its significance and meaning.⁸⁴

Two Tamil towns in particular became early sites associated with the dance of Śiva. Both Chidambaram and Tiruvālaṅkāṭu were, early on, associated with a dance competition between Śiva and Kālī (in Sanskrit, Kālī); the allusion appears in early legends associated with Chidambaram, and Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār seems to reference it in her allusion in “Decade-1” verse 4 to a dance in which the Lord is “whirling and lifting his foot straight to the heavens” in a “rivalry” (*vātittu*), while her next verse mentions a child named “Kālī.”⁸⁵ From *purāṇas* associated with both sites, dating from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the basic kernel of this story is that the goddess Kālī became full of pride and Śiva came to suppress it; the goddess challenged him to a dance competition, and eventually he defeated her by performing a dance in which he lifted one leg up to the sky, which she could not imitate; thus, she was tamed (see Figure 1).⁸⁶ Ultimately, the story of this particular dance became centralized at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and marginalized at Chidambaram, with the latter favoring Śiva's “dance of bliss” (*ānandatāṇḍava*, embodied in the image of Naṭarāja). The story and image of the Dancing Śiva with a leg raised to the sky (*ūrdhvatāṇḍava*) is particularly Tamil; the *Liṅga Purāṇa* of Sanskrit tradition describes the dance competition but does not have the detail of Śiva's checkmate by lifting his leg, and in fact it may represent the development of a later tradition of the competition designed to refute the version at Chidambaram.⁸⁷ I will not here enter into the scholarly debate about which site developed the story of the dance competition first; for our purposes the early association of two sites in Tamil country with this story, and more generally with Śiva's dance, is what is significant.⁸⁸

Although it is difficult to marshal evidence beyond the literary for the years before 600 CE in Tamilnadu – underscoring the importance of literary sources⁸⁹ – we can speculate as to why the dance of Śiva, Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and Chidambaram might have been connected and significant in the century prior. As noted, the two seem to be connected to a similar story although they are geographically far apart, with Tiruvālaṅkāṭu in the north of Tamil country and Chidambaram comparatively southern, although still in the middle of Tamil lands. One reason for the connection between the two might have been that they were imagined to define the northern and southern boundaries of a polity, specifically, that of the Pallava dynasty. Perhaps Pallava dynasty ruler Simhaviṣṇu (r. ca. 555–90),



Figure 1 Parapet at the Vaṭāraṇyēśvara Cuvāmi Tirukōyil in Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. The central scene depicts Śiva dancing the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* ('upward dance'), in which his left leg is raised to the heavens. Members of his celestial entourage stand in front; at the outer edges of this group are villagers, a man in respectful pose and a woman with a child. Gaṇeśa is in the shrine to the right. Photo taken by the author.

whom later inscriptions celebrate as expanding Pallava territories from their capital in Kanchipuram (which is in the region of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu) to the south beyond the River Kāvēri (which is in the region of Chidambaram), encouraged such a connection.⁹⁰ This king probably also excavated a cave in Nellore district in which is found a dancing Śiva image.⁹¹ There is also a Pallava cave painting of Śiva in the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* posture,⁹² and this image is also found carved in stone on the walls of the Kailāsanatha Temple in Kanchipuram ca. 700–28.⁹³ As Padma Kaimal suggests, the image of the dancing Śiva "could have evoked the successful warrior," given that he is portrayed as dancing in the mythological stories when he defeats others, be they demons or Kālī.⁹⁴

The Pallavas were, along with other regional dynasties, including relatives of the Pallavas in Andhra Pradesh and the Pallavas' rivals the Cālukyas in Karnataka (both of whom also developed images of the dancing Śiva),⁹⁵ in the process of creating a tradition of dynastic affiliation with the dancing Śiva, probably largely, though not exclusively, to announce their identity as military victors. This trend reached its zenith with the Cōlas (Cholas), who by 970 had laid definite claim

to the image of Dancing Śiva performing the *ānanda-tāṇḍava* that had been celebrated at Chidambaram by the Śaiva poet-saint Māṇikkavācakar in the eighth century, as “the cult of the dancing Śiva was adopted as the state cult of the Cōḷa empire” through the agency of Parāntaka I, Gaṇḍarāditya Uṭṭama, and Queen Sembiyan Mahādevī.⁹⁶ The association of Śiva temples with a place made sacred by the actions of a goddess – Kālī at Chidambaram and Tiruvāṅkāṭu, and Niṣumbhasūdinī at Tanjore⁹⁷ – figures here as well in terms of the developing imperial idiom.

The interest of the Pallavas would provide a context, if not a partial explanation, for Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's location of Śiva's dance at Tiruvāṅkāṭu and the understanding of her reference to a named Tamil town. The emphasis on the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* (one leg raised to point straight upwards) at Tiruvāṅkāṭu does relate to her poetry, but it could also have been developed in the interests of the Pallavas as well as in the interests of the increasingly powerful Chidambaram temple as it became patronized by the Cōḷas. This should not obscure the fact that the poet seems to refer to this particular dance in only one of her verses. She frequently mentions iconographic details that link her vision of the Lord's dance with the image that crystallized into the Lord of Dance (Nāṭarāja performing the *ānanda-tāṇḍava*), such as the fire in the palm (“Wonder” vv. 8, 11, 97, 98; “Decade-2” vv. 2, 7) and the whirling matted locks (“Wonder” v. 70; “Decade-1” v. 1). By 971 CE there is a Cōḷa image at Konerirajapuram of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār viewing Śiva's *ānanda-tāṇḍava* dance, and this latter tradition informs current representations of her elsewhere, including at Kāraikkāl and Tiruvāṅkāṭu, both of which also represent images of the saint next to images of Nāṭarāja.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is best understood as an interpreter of tradition; she is not akin to an oppressor, as Mahalakshmi seems to suggest. Indeed, Mahalakshmi's emphasis on Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a figure who both erases the goddess Korṟavai and positions herself as a rival to Pārvaṭī – an argument that itself evokes the patriarchal construction that women are constantly rivals to each other⁹⁸ – obscures Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's role in contributing to Tantra, with which she shares elements, including the presence of women (herself, female ghouls), as well as “methods that force self-confrontation,” such as her emphasis on the cremation ground.⁹⁹ In a pluralistic world, the poet interprets selectively towards the creation of a devotional subjectivity that adores Śiva. With Śiva as her focus, the poet was able to create a subjectivity that involved both philosophy and devotion – whether this combination could have reasonably been achieved with respect to the goddess Korṟavai is an open question. I agree with Mahalakshmi's argument that a critical inquiry of an author should go beyond examining a “self” to take into consideration historical context, but I would suggest that she argues for historical context to the detriment of understanding the devotional subjectivity – the “self” – of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, owing in part to her almost exclusive reliance on “Decade-1,” which is a very small portion of the poet's works and in addition one that is quite different from her longer poems. I argue for the necessity of both “self” and historical context in a critical inquiry of female saints' mystical devotional writings.

Assurances

Aside from its signature verse, the “Wonder” ends with a series of questions directed towards the Lord; thus, the poem as a whole does not end on a note of assurance. Instead, the poet intersperses verses of assurance throughout her works. In one verse, she answers the question of whether or not the Lord will act to help devotees:

Would the lord who dances
at the burning ground
inhabited by ghouls
only secretly pity all souls?

Oh unfortunate ones,
when he feels pity,
how would he not help?
He will give all the world
to those who pray to him each day.
(“Wonder” v. 78)

Of course, there remains the matter of the “if,” which is contingent on devotees’ serving the Lord, an indication that the relationship is ongoing and lifelong, a life’s work, rather than something that is completed and can be taken for granted. Within this context, the verse offers an assurance that the Lord will generously reward a devotional subjectivity that has been crafted over time.

In other verses, the poet emphasizes the nature of the Lord as a refuge for *bhaktas* in the present day, provided they actively relate to him. Two consecutive verses provide a question and an answer:

If we, his servants,
understand our human sorrows
and bewail them,
why should the lord
of the lustrous red body
and the darkened throat
who is our master ignore us?
(“Wonder” v. 4)

The lord alone
causes all beings here
to be born, flourish, and pass away;
if we piteously cry “our father”
when beset with burning afflictions,
he will eliminate them.
(“Wonder” v. 5)

The mercy or grace of the Lord described in these verses is intertwined with actions by the devotees; in the first verse, they understand and articulate the problems of the human condition, while in the second verse they specifically call out to Śiva. It is the devotees' pursuit of a relationship that opens the possibility for salvation.

Always have I kept
God, my sweet lord,
as a sweet treasure in my heart;
I have taken him as my savior
and I experience bliss;
is anything an obstacle for me?
(“Wonder” v. 10)

Finally, the signature verses on the “Wonder” and “Decades” self-referentially offer the assurance that anyone who recites her poetry will be freed from all sorrows; they will have their love for Śiva grow; and they will attain the Bliss of Śiva. With the composition of her corpus, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ added a new dimension to the kinds of activities in which the devotee could engage the mind and heart with the Lord.

4 The biographer's view

Cēkkiḷār was the self-appointed custodian of the lives of the Tamil Śīva-*bhakti* saints. He is the author of the *Tiruttoṇṭar Purāṇam* (“Story of the Holy Saints”), more familiarly known as the *Periya Purāṇam* (“Great Story”). According to a biography written about him some two centuries after his lifetime, he hailed from the northern area of Tamil country (Toṇṭai region), and his given name was Aruṇmoli Tēvar or “Master of grace-filled language”; the name he is remembered by relates to his status as a member of the Vēḷāḷa caste, traditional, well-to-do Tamil agriculturalists. He became a court minister. The enchantment of a Chola dynasty king, Aṇapayan, now identified by most as Kulōttuṅka II (r. 1133–50), with a Jain epic, the *Cīvakaśintāmaṇi* (“Wish Fulfilling Gem”), which describes the making of a Jain saint out of a young man from the warrior caste, challenged Cēkkiḷār to write about the Śaiva saints. This he did in Chidambaram; his completed text received much honor then, being paraded on the back of an elephant and read aloud at a year-long ceremony.¹

His authoritative narrative of the saints retains much influence now as both the twelfth and culminating volume of the Tamil Śīva-*bhakti* canon (the *Tirumurai* or “Sacred Collection”) and in the public imagination. Her story is what most Tamils today know of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, and not her poetry; her identity is mediated by the story.² Her poetry enjoyed some attention during the Tamil Renaissance of the 1940s, with several publications of her poems, but they are not well known today.³ In contrast, her story was rendered into several different languages, including Sanskrit and Kannada.⁴ Her life as represented by Cēkkiḷār was also the subject of a film.⁵ Images of her in bronze and stone draw on her biography, and are found across Tamilnadu and south-east Asia.⁶ Additionally, while the saint's poetry can be viewed as autobiographical in both the stanzas in which she explicitly refers to herself as well as in her personal vision of her devotional subjectivity that she traces in her corpus as a whole, much of the content of the poems provides concrete images of Śīva, thus prioritizing the beauty and power of the Lord. In contrast, Cēkkiḷār's narrative provides a concrete image of *the poet herself*. He is the author who made saints out of the servants. His work was instrumental in creating and consolidating a public memory of the poet. This chapter explores Cēkkiḷār's interpretation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār through discussion of overlapping categories; a translation of his story of her life is in [Appendix 2](#).

The saint as a poet

Cēkkiḷār's story ("Story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār," hereafter "Story") identifies Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār as a poet and interacts with the content of her poetry. He covers her youth within the first six verses and identifies her as a *pēy* and a poet in the last thirteen verses of his sixty-five-verse telling of her life story; these three identities are related to her self-representation in her poetry. However, the bulk of his story portrays her as a wife, which has no correspondence with her poetry at all, nor with the two earlier sources within the tradition that mention her, one of which calls her a *pēy*, and one of which describes her as being from Kāraikkāl, walking on her head (presumably using her hands) to see Lord Śiva on his holy mountain in the Himālayas, and being called "Mother" by him.⁷

In describing her youth, Cēkkiḷār quotes from her poetry. In her first verse of the "Wonder," Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār says "after I was born and learned to speak (*molipayinṛa*), with overflowing love (*kātal*) I reached your sacred henna red feet." In the third verse of his "Story" Cēkkiḷār says "she learned to speak (*molipayinṛa*) so that she could express the love (*kātal*) that overflowed in her heart without end, and become a servant to the feet of the Lord."⁸ Like the poet, her biographer emphasizes the learning of language as essential to her identity and practice as a servant to the Lord. However, whereas her poetry continues by describing her experience as a devotee, her biographer's narrative quickly turns towards the social drama of her becoming a wife.

Cēkkiḷār captures the sense of the poet as being motivated not only by love but also by requests she makes of the Lord, which resonates with the questioning nature of her poetry. Towards the end of his biography he represents her identity as a poet as precipitated by her giving up her status as wife and her transformation to a ghou (pēy). She asks the Lord to release her from her beauty, which she defines socially as being for the benefit of her husband, and replace it with the form of the ghou (pēy) who celebrate his sacred feet ("Story" v. 49). That she has direct contact with Śiva was established earlier in the story, when she asks him for a mango and he gives it to her ("Story" v. 30). Thus, Cēkkiḷār draws on the poet's own self-representation in her poetry as one who directly asks the Lord questions. However, in the case of her request to become a ghou, Cēkkiḷār describes her as being in a state of mind of supreme insight and clarity, in contrast to the scene in which she asks for the mango, in which she is worried and anxious. Indeed, in his description of her bodily transformation he greatly emphasizes her mind: At the time she asks to become a ghou "she meditated on the ankleted feet of the Lord . . . achieving great knowledge through her singular focus" ("Story" v. 48), and her request is represented as indicative of her full spiritual maturity ("she fully realized the spiritual path and obtained what she desired," "Story" v. 50). Like the poet, her biographer associates the image of a ghou with "othered" consciousness and, also like the poet, he portrays the ghou form as inspiring fear in human onlookers, since he represents her relatives as quickly paying reverence to her as a ghou and then departing in fear (*añci*; "Story" v. 51).

She composes her two poems in this exalted state: First, in a state of divine wisdom (*ñānam*), she composes what Cēkkiḷār calls the *Arputat Tiruvantāti* or “Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder” (“Story” v. 52). Continuing his emphasis on direct experience, Cēkkiḷār uses a Sanskrit term (*ñānam*) that in classical texts denotes an unmediated knowledge of reality. Second, “brimming with profound insight” (*pēruṇarvu*), she next composed and sang (*pāṭi*) the renowned “Double Garland of Linked Verses” (*iraṭṭai mālai antāti*; “Story” v. 53). The title of “Garland” evolved from Cēkkiḷār’s time so that the “two” were specified as “gems;” both serve as a descriptive reference to the poem’s alternation between two meters. The title of “Wonder” is more complicated, since it is a description that finds no reference in her poem; she simply does not use the term “wonder” (*arputam*). I will discuss the significance of his selection later in this section. By joining her transformation to a ghou to her composition of two poems, Cēkkiḷār makes her perform devotion in a manner that can be publicly viewed, in a material analogue to her spiritually realized inner self. The detail that she “sings” her poems indicates their public, performed status.⁹

However, Cēkkiḷār’s positioning of the poet as a ghou before she composes her poetry raises several issues. In the first place, she is no longer a social being; indeed, her own kin are frightened of her, and the motif of onlookers’ fear is repeated in a later verse (“Story” v. 54). If she is not in the social world, then the “we” of her poetry becomes very problematic – who is her audience? Also, if she has already matured into fully realizing the devotional path, what are we to make of the oscillation between questions and assurances in her poetry? We reach a paradox: In making her truly one of us – a fully rendered human character who has a life span – the biographer individualizes her to the extent that she is not “us.” What is lost is her poetry’s intimacy of the “we” (inclusive) of a human voice, which encourages the hearer to identify with the struggle to become, and to remain, a servant. Part of the paradox is of course endemic to the discourse of sainthood; as a saint is an exemplar she represents an attainable – but only rarely so – status. But it is not just this, as the poet assumes an audience even if much of her poetry reads as meditations because that audience is not explicitly defined. In addition, Cēkkiḷār himself has a vested interest in emphasizing her shared humanity, since his narrative, with its details of caste and occupation not found in sources preceding his work, clearly aims to present an expansive human community of *bhaktas* that includes both genders, all castes, rural and urban folk, and an array of occupations: In other words, everyone, and anyone, can become a *bhakta*. In both her poetry and his biography there is a tension between the individual and the collective; however, her lack of emphasis on the particulars of her embodiment tends to favor the collective, while his insistence on the details of her conditions of birth and the specifics of her activities tend to favor the individual.

The singularity of her sudden, and literal, taking the form of a ghou in the biography is another contradiction to ordinary humanity, along with the other miracles that punctuate Cēkkiḷār’s narrative, such as her immediately receiving two mangos from Śiva. Significantly, the ghou relates to her poetry, where it finds mention, while the mango miracle is found only in Cēkkiḷār’s narrative. In “Wonder” v. 86,

the poet expresses a fervent desire to see the “highest form” of the Lord, and indicates that she has “joined his good band of ghouls” (*pēyāya nal kaṇattil onṛāya nām*). The interpretive issue with this verse is that, as a ghoul is part of Śiva’s host, if she has already become a ghoul, why has she not yet seen the highest form of the Lord as the Dancer? Cēkkiḷār resolves this issue by revising her statement: As she sings the “Wonder” she lovingly thinks “I have truly become one of the fine group that praises his beautiful red lotus-like feet!” (*porpu uṭaic ceyya pāta puṇṭarī kaṇkaḷ pōrrum nal kaṇattiṇil onṛu ālēṇ nāṇ*, “Story” v. 52). In Cēkkiḷār’s narrative she has become a ghoul, but she has not yet joined the ghouls at Śiva the Dancer’s feet; instead, she has joined the group of *bhaktas* who praise the Lord’s feet. Cēkkiḷār implicitly provides an explanation for why her poem suggests that she has become a ghoul but is not at the site of the Lord’s dance: She becomes a ghoul first, which visibly marks her as a true *bhakta*, and then she literally travels to the site of his dance.

And so the story then turns to her journey towards Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. Cēkkiḷār represents her as leaving Tamil country to travel to the Lord at his residence at Mount Kailāsa in the Himālayas, thereby incorporating details provided by an earlier biographer, Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi. Cēkkiḷār also uses the sequence to re-emphasize the saint’s love for the Lord, to balance his prior emphasis on her intellect: She is “brimming with love (*aṇpu*) and joy” (“Story” v. 56); her love is noticed by Umā, who asks about its nature, and Śiva replies that her love is like a mother’s (“Story” vv. 57, 58); and the saint lovingly bows to the Lord (“Story” v. 59). In the Lord’s discourse with his wife and with the saint, the Lord speaks Tamil. This time, the Lord gives her permission to ask him for something, and she requests three things: “May those who desire you with undying joyful love (*aṇpu*) not be reborn; if I am born again, may I never forget you; may I sit at your feet, happily singing while you, virtue itself, dance” (“Story” v. 60).

Śiva directs her to the “brilliant southern region,” to “resplendent Ālaṅkāṭu, a famously fertile ancient town” (“Story” v. 61), where she can watch his dance, experience bliss (*āṇantam*), and sing to him. Significantly, Cēkkiḷār avoids any mention of the town of Paḷaiyaṇūr (a proper name that can translate to “ancient town”), which was linked to Ālaṅkāṭu in a poem of Campantar’s that mentioned a woman who deceived her husband,¹⁰ although he does describe Ālaṅkāṭu as a fertile (*paḷaṇam*) ancient (*mūtu*) town (*ūr*), which may evoke the association (“Story” v. 61). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a story of Nīli that is associated with Paḷaiyaṇūr, which is located next to Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, and Campantar’s ambiguity could point to the existence of that story’s association with the place by the seventh century. I relate this story as it is presently known in the next chapter, when I discuss the festival at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. For now it is important to note that it is a controversial story in which a woman who was murdered by her husband becomes a *pēy* and avenges the incident by killing the man who was her husband in his previous life, in spite of her promise to the men in the town that she meant him no harm; when they find him murdered they commit suicide. It is thus not a pleasant story, associating a female ghoul with vengeance and murder, and Cēkkiḷār avoids mentioning it anywhere in his narrative, even in sections beyond

the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. He was clearly familiar with at least some version of the story, at least in part because he himself hailed from a town (Kunrattūr) in the Toṇṭai region that is relatively close to Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and Paḷaiyaṇūr. Here are examples from his stories of other saints:

- In his story of a saint from the Toṇṭai (northern) region of Tamil country he says: “In Toṇṭai Nāṭu is situated the town of Paḷaiyaṇūr. The citizens of that town had made a promise on the security of their lives to help a merchant who had sought their aid. In the end, they had to weigh one against the other, and chose to honour that promise at the cost of their own lives” (“Great Story” v. 1,080).
- In his story of poet-saint Campantar he says: “In all the neighboring shrines, he joyfully worshipped the Lord, until he came to Paḷaiyaṇūr Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. At that place there were Vēḷāḷars living, whose clan enjoyed a high reputation for never having departed from the true way” (“Great Story” v. 1,606).
- Later in his story of Campantar, he describes the circumstances of Campantar’s composition of the ambiguous hymn. When the saint approached Paḷaiyaṇūr Tiruvālaṅkāṭu: “‘This must be Tiruvālaṅkāṭu,’ he thought, ‘This is the town to which our mother from Kāraikkāl came walking on her head, while all the people of the world looked on, and the seven worlds sung her praise.’” Campantar expresses a reluctance to enter the town, and sleeps “in a nearby village, where the inhabitants enjoyed an unblemished reputation for virtue.” The Lord of Ālaṅkāṭu then comes to him in his sleep, urging him to compose a hymn. “Recognizing the grace of the Lord at work, he began to sing a hymn of praise with melting devotion. Beginning with the words, ‘He comes to me in my sleep’, he composed his hymn according to the rules of scripture, telling the story of how the people of Paḷaiyaṇūr had kept their promise without fail” (“Great Story” vv. 2,905–2,908).
- In the story of Cuntarar he describes the travels of the poet-saint and his servant-devotee companions: “Leaving Veṇṇākam behind, they came to Paḷaiyaṇūr, surrounded by farmland and lotus-covered lakes. They stayed the night near Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, where Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār had walked on her head around the shrine of the dancing Lord” (“Great Story” v. 3,436).¹¹

It is apparent from these examples, which constitute all of Cēkkiḷār’s mentions of Paḷaiyaṇūr in his text, that the biographer steers clear of mentioning Nīli, instead focusing exclusively on the virtuous men of the town. Furthermore, he clearly separates Paḷaiyaṇūr from Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, and associates Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār only with the latter. His message seems clear: Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār is not to be confused with a ghou (pēy) in the sense of a malevolent being; instead, as a ghou she possesses superior spiritual wisdom and has received the ultimate boon from the Lord himself to witness (to take *darśan* or “sacred sight” of) his sacred dance.¹²

Cēkkiḷār’s cautious approach continues when he describes Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, for he makes absolutely no mention of the grisly mis-en-scène that she so fully describes in her hymns. And he is aware of her hymns, recounting

the first words in Tamil of the first verse of "Decade-1" and "Decade-2." He mentions her "older good verses . . . beginning with *koṅkai tirāṅki* ["sagging breasts"]" ("Story" v. 63), indicating that she sang these first and that they are "older" than the "sacred verses beginning with *eṭṭi*, *ilavam*, and *ikai* [names of wild, thorny poisonous trees]" ("Story" v. 64). She is not at a cremation ground at all, but instead at "excellent" Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. There are no ghouls around, nor birds of prey.

Picking up on Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's "Decade-2," with its refrain of the "beautiful lord" who dances, Cēkkiḷār describes the dancing Lord Śiva only in majestic and beautiful terms, as "the truth and meaning of the excellent Vedas" (v. 62) and "adorned with honeyed *koṅrai* blossoms" (v. 64). Moreover, Cēkkiḷār does not make any mention of the strenuousness of the dance. In one verse, he obliquely refers to the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* dance ("Story" v. 63), but in the culminating verse he refers to the dance only as *tāṇṭava* dance, leaving the nature of the dance unspecified ("Story" v. 65). One reason for the ambiguity of the dance form may be Cēkkiḷār's presence at Chidambaram, home of Śiva who performs the dance of bliss (*āṇanta tāṇṭava*), and in this connection it is noticeable both that the biographer mentions that on witnessing the Lord's dance, the saint is to be full of bliss ("Story" v. 61, using a Tamil form of the Sanskrit term, *āṇantam*), and that he describes the Lord as the one "who dances in the hall" (v. 50), which is also a reference to the Dancing Śiva at Chidambaram. In addition, Cēkkiḷār's patron, the Chola king Kulōttuṅka II, was said to be a great devotee of the dancing Śiva at Chidambaram, and he may have built the grand 1,000-pillared hall there, continuing the building activities of his royal ancestors.¹³ Furthermore, the Lord's dance in Cēkkiḷār's narrative is that which is "revered and loved by those on earth" ("Story" v. 63), evoking the prominence of the Lord of the Dance (Naṭarāja performing the *āṇanta tāṇṭava*), and the dance is composed of "graceful movements in time with the drumbeat" ("Story" v. 64), not at all the strenuous dance of destruction or the dance of rivalry. In fact, his description of the dance as "graceful" uses most, but not all, of the words of a refrain to the first verse of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's "Decade-2" on the dance at the cremation ground; however, Cēkkiḷār's story leaves out the hymn's reference to Śiva's dwarfish hosts (who resemble goblins) singing, replacing it with Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's own singing.¹⁴ Cēkkiḷār also portrays the saint as offering praise ("Story" v. 63), and experiencing love ("Story" v. 64), not at all the challenging milieu that the saint envisioned in her own poetry. It is also significant in this regard that, while Cēkkiḷār does mention several of the attributes of Śiva highlighted by the poet, including his adornment by the cobra ("Story" vv. 3, 17, 30), his destruction of the triple cities ("Story" v. 53), and the dancer (already discussed), he sublimates her references to the Lord adorned with the white skulls of others by referring instead to white shells ("Story" v. 59).

The ghouls as imagined by Cēkkiḷār is thus not a demon, and this seems to accord with the vision of the poet, if her two hymns on the dance at the cremation ground are read in the context of her two poems. Both would seem to agree that a ghouls, as an identity for a *bhakta*, involves both love and a consciousness that is beyond the ordinary, as well as a desire to see the dancing Śiva. However, their assumptions about "othering" consciousness are quite different: She challenges

bhaktas to accept all of God, including his awesome, frightening power at the cremation ground; whereas he portrays a beautiful, benevolent Śiva in a Tamil town, and perhaps even within a temple, since by that time the Pallava and Chola dynasties had been building at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu for centuries.¹⁵ It is entirely possible that Cēkkiḷār did not describe the place as wild and uninhabited because it simply did not have that character in his own time: The *pālai* landscape was now a town developed and constructed by serious imperial interest.

Alternatively, in a recent article, Anne Monius has convincingly argued that it was Cēkkiḷār's theological motive to portray Śiva as a loving father, in the context of the religious satire of Śiva's frightening (and sexually suggestive) forms, including his dancing at the cremation ground, promoted by Hindu worshippers of Viṣṇu and the non-Hindu Jains:

The nasty, ash-covered, ludicrously underdressed denizen of the cremation grounds satirized by the Vaiṣṇava poets, in other words, emerges in the *Periya Purāṇam* as a thoroughly paternal, asexual, heroic figure, readily accessible through those devotees who serve him and his community of followers.¹⁶

Among many examples, Monius points to elements from the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār to illustrate her argument, including the “chaste” images of the saint as an incarnation of Lakṣmī in beauty, and her title of “mother” as bestowed by Śiva.¹⁷ In addition, the saint's call to Śiva as “father” (v. 59) fits in with Monius' litany of examples of “Śiva the Father” in the *Periya Purāṇam*,¹⁸ while her birth as a result of “the practice of austerities” (v. 2) by her father and her transformation to a (nonsexual) skeleton fit in with the asexual theme Monius identifies.

As many scholars have noted, the *Periya Purāṇam* is filled with images of the saints' violent bodily transformations. One of the most studied is Cīruttōṇṭar, who was asked by Śiva, disguised as a fearsome Śaiva ascetic (the name Bhairava, *vairavar*, is used in the text), to provide him with a meal made from a sacrificed young child; Cīruttōṇṭar cuts up his own son to feed the mendicant (the child is restored at the end of the story).¹⁹ Monius argues that the violent images in Cēkkiḷār's text were written against the Jain *Cīvakaśintāmaṇi*; Cēkkiḷār replaced the “aesthetics of disgust” of the Jain text, in which violent acts encouraged renunciation, with images of “heroic” love on the part of the Śaiva *bhaktas* acting in the world, with their violent acts constituting “play” between a loving Lord and his “children.”²⁰ Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's story is not considered one of the violent ones in the *Periya Purāṇam* – although she is transformed from a beauty to a ghoulish figure this occurs voluntarily, not violently – but it does participate in the “cleaning up” of Śiva's image. It seems convincing that Cēkkiḷār was at least in part responding to the vicious satire of Śiva by other Hindu and non-Hindu groups when he banished Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's poetic version of the “aesthetics of disgust,” in which she embraces the fearful image of Śiva dancing at the cremation ground, and in fact she herself had recorded such controversy in her poems, both in terms of others' misunderstanding of the fearful image of God (as ornamented with bones and a cobra) and their ridicule of the devotees of that image.²¹ The *Periya Purāṇam*

addresses these concerns by having saints act heroically on behalf of Śiva and his devotees, examples of which include the story of saint Cakki, who cut out the tongues of those who disparaged Śiva-*bhaktas*. The image of a fearful Śiva is represented in the Cēkkiḷār's narrative at least twice, though the "Father" image is predominant in the biography as a whole.²²

Even Cēkkiḷār's representation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's consciousness highlights God's beauty. First, the form of *pēy* (ghoul) indicates the beautiful and desirable state of god-consciousness. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is in an enlightened state of consciousness when she requests the *pēy* form, and immediately after the transformation of her body she turns to compose poetry. Through this connection of *pēy* to poetry, Cēkkiḷār suggests that *pēy* indexes a state of "god-consciousness," a meaning that was embodied by Tamil Viṣṇu-*bhakti* saints who are contemporaneous with Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār.²³ This meaning of *pēy* was also explored in post-Cēkkiḷār Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition.²⁴ Second, Cēkkiḷār's title of the first composition she publicly utters, *Aṟputat Tiruvantāti*, "Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder," is revealing. Significantly, the saint does not use the term "wonder" (*aṟputam*) in her poetry: The term represents her biographer's attempt to locate her poetry within aesthetic theory by appealing to a recognized category in Sanskrit Indian aesthetics, where it appears as the *rasa adbhuta*.²⁵

In his elegant study of the aesthetics of wonder, Philip Fisher suggests that there are several characteristics that are especially constitutive of wonder.²⁶ First and foremost, it is related to knowing: Fisher describes a "poetics of wonder" that provides "a map of the features of thinking that guide us to satisfaction and a feeling of intelligibility within experience ... The local feeling of intelligibility is what we call ... the feeling of 'getting it'." Event-moments of wonder that we encounter in ordinary experience attract our attention:

The path from the puzzling to the feeling of intelligibility raises, among other questions, the issue of just why certain things puzzle us. Not everything that we do not know or cannot ever know puzzles us and draws us into thinking about it in an attempt to explain it to our satisfaction.²⁷

Her biographer informs us that the best way to understand Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's poem is as "the experience of wonder" – on the part of both the author and the hearer. Viewed through this lens, Cēkkiḷār's designation of wonder underscores the poet's attempts to understand the Lord, through both her descriptions of him and her questions to him; she attempts to "get it," and to share it, in her poetry. He also captures the visual nature of her poetry in his appeal to "wonder" to characterize her perspective.²⁸ However, wonder is first and foremost connected to the beautiful, because attraction and fascination provide the impetus to explore – as Fisher notes, the classic example of wonder is the rainbow, and it fascinated philosophers from Aristotle to Descartes.²⁹ Cēkkiḷār's appeal to wonder is matched by his exclusive emphasis on the majestic Śiva in his "Story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār."

In representing her as a poet, Cēkkiḷār assures his readers that her compositions are authentic expressions of *bhakti*; her two poems are born from her attainment

of the highest spiritual wisdom, and her two hymns are her engagement with the Lord who dances before her. He interprets her compositions by ordering them and by contextualizing them in specific dramatic events. He also views them through the lens of the beautiful, displacing the forms that inspire fear from the body of the Lord to the body of the saint, and in so doing he can be said to domesticate her own vision of the challenges that face those who cultivate a devotional subjectivity. Her biographer's project is decentering in a manner different than hers; he describes a rupture in social domesticity.

A female religious exemplar

The "Story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār" is a discourse that certifies a woman as a religious exemplar.³⁰ Within the *Periya Purāṇam* there are two other stories of female *bhaktas*, though these are told very briefly: Maṅkaiyarkku Araciṃyār ("the Queen among women"), a queen of the Pandiya dynasty who supported the poet-saint Campantar (three verses); and Icai Nāṇṇiyār ("female Knower of music"), the mother of the poet-saint Cuntarar (one verse).³¹ Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is the only woman in the collection who was not associated with any of the famous male poet-saints, and she alone is an author. Largely through Cēkkiḷār's intervention, tradition understands all three women to have been historical figures. His substantial narratives of many of the saints, including Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, foreground the nature of their bodies and their bodily actions, and culminate in their attainment of Lord Śiva. These stories thematize "the doubleness of mystical discourse and practice, which reflects and speaks to deep ambiguities within bodily existence . . . poised between the desire to transcend the body's limitations and the recognition that transcendence occurs only through the body."³²

In Tamil literary history prior to Cēkkiḷār, several compositions represented women as religiously significant: The epic *Cilappatikāram* (ca. 450 CE), in which the heroine is deified as a goddess at its conclusion; the epic *Māṇimēkalai* (ca. 550 CE), in which a woman renounces her courtesan life and becomes a Buddhist nun; the epic *Nīlakēci* (ninth century), in which the heroine becomes a Jain and wins debates against major male Buddhist teachers across north India; and the *bhakti* poetry of Āṇṭāl (tenth century), in which the author expresses "bridal mysticism" feelings of longing for Kṛṣṇa, in one instance imagining herself to be one of his cowherd devotees. As he turned to write the "Story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār," Cēkkiḷār could draw on this long history of female leaders represented in literature, along with texts within Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* as well as oral traditions. However, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, in her poetry, did not long for Śiva as a lover, as did other prominent female *bhakti* saints (Āṇṭāl, and Mīrābāī of the sixteenth century), and so the epics may be more relevant for comparison.

Thematic resonances, especially with the companion epics of *Cilappatikāram* and *Māṇimēkalai* (they are related by the presence of the same courtesan, Madhavī, and her daughter Māṇimēkalai, in both texts – another example of one text expanding on a detail in a prior text), seem significant. For example, in both epics, as in Cēkkiḷār's portrait of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, the theme of the chaste wife

is central. The *Cilappatikāram* portrays the chaste wife (*karpū*; in the sense of unshakable conjugal fidelity) Kaṇṇaki as standing by her husband even though he abandons her for a courtesan; she then uses this moral power much later in the epic to righteously avenge her husband's unjust execution by burning down the city of Madurai.³³ The identity of the wife and husband in the merchant class, his abandonment of her, her chastity, and her moral power all resonate with Cēkkiḷār's story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. In the *Māṇimēkalai*, it is significant that the heroine rejects her birth identity and its associated duties (she was born to a courtesan) and becomes a Buddhist renouncer. Moreover, the text presents female nuns as equivalent to chaste wives: An ascetic character gives a discourse in which he says that men who lustfully approach either chaste women (wives) or women performing asceticism are certain to lose their lives. As Paula Richman discusses, this was a way for the text to include Buddhist nuns within a major cultural value in its attempt to make the latter's practice and identity both familiar and acceptable to the Tamil populace.³⁴ Cēkkiḷār specifies that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is chaste as a devoted wife (*karpūtaiya*, "Story" v. 22).

The heroine Māṇimēkalai's rejection of her own sexual attraction to a handsome prince who avidly courts her and her embrace of the renouncer's life is central to the text: "*Māṇimēkalai*'s main story centers upon a personal conflict between love and renunciation; the four sections of the main story describe the heroine's ever-growing commitment to the Buddhist monastic life."³⁵ Love and renunciation are key themes in Cēkkiḷār's portrait of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as well, though the terms have a very different content. Sexual love, specifically conjugal love, is not overtly thematized in the story, in part because of Cēkkiḷār's de-eroticism of Śiva and Śaiva tradition, as Monius has discussed. However, the text does specify in one verse that the newly married Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār and her husband Paramatattāṇ were greatly in love (*kātal*, "Story" v. 13). At the very end of the story she experiences love (*kātal*, "Story" v. 64) for Śiva as she watches his dance.³⁶ There is the suggestion in Cēkkiḷār's story that her love for Śiva replaces her love for her husband.³⁷ In contrast to the *Māṇimēkalai*, the story does not banish love as an emotion; it is instead a culmination of the religious path.

Arguably, Cēkkiḷār also keeps an image of renunciation in the picture as well; the two are compatible in his story, rather than opposing, as in *Māṇimēkalai*. As Vijaya Ramaswamy notes, the body the saint takes on as a *pēy* does resonate with an image of an ascetic's body:

The assumption of a skeletal form has been dismissed as an implausible miracle tale. However instead of assuming that a miraculous transformation took place whereby a beautiful woman (a point which Chekkizhar emphasizes) was transformed into a demoness, a more commonsense explanation is possible. It is logical to postulate that the severe penances she underwent and the degree of ascetic renunciation practised by her may have caused her to become thin and emaciated, skeletal in appearance.³⁸

I disagree with Ramaswamy both on her dismissal of the event as a "miracle," as miracles do play a productive role in the story,³⁹ and on her assertion that the saint

practiced ascetic renunciation, because neither the saint nor her biographer represents her ghoulish body in that way, but I do agree that the body as a not-beautiful “bag of bones” would have that cultural resonance. We could suggest that Cēkṣiṭār was cultivating such a resonance, as he avoids the gruesome in his story. In addition, his joining of love and asceticism – with overtones of renunciation, as he does suggest that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ experiences a rupture with the social world – could be a response to *Māṇimēkalai*’s separation of the two.⁴⁰ In fact this resonance is indexed in bronze images of the saint used for worship, in which she has earlobes stretched by earrings that are not depicted because they were long ago renounced; I discuss this in the next chapter.

Other themes strengthen the impression that Cēkṣiṭār is in dialogue with the epic, as both authors greatly emphasize the beauty of their heroines, which ultimately signifies the depth of their religious commitment because they reject their beauty’s currency in the social world; indicate that both women are spiritually inclined to begin with; portray both as “mothers” even though they do not have children (*Māṇimēkalai* feeds many with a magic begging bowl that is never depleted); describe their heroines as engaging in meaningful speech that publicly promotes the religion (*Māṇimēkalai* teaches; Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ composes poems and hymns); and portray them specifically as dedicated to avoiding rebirth (after hearing a lengthy and erudite discourse by the great Buddhist sage Aravaṇa Aṭiṭaḷ, *Māṇimēkalai* dedicates herself to this goal; Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ specifically makes this request to Śiva on Mount Kailāsa).

This plethora of similar themes reveals the overlapping images and issues that male “biographers” thought appropriate to both interpret and to represent female religious adepts across traditions. It also serves to heighten Cēkṣiṭār’s omissions and additions and thus disagreements among the authors. For example, Cēkṣiṭār does not reproduce *Māṇimēkalai*’s visits to many teachers, who represent various traditions and whom she refutes, on her spiritual journey. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ did not have to learn *bhakti* from teachers; it was innate.⁴¹ Cēkṣiṭār thus naturalizes *bhakti* as a “way of life.” A corollary is that Cēkṣiṭār does not refute marriage, which I discuss shortly. In addition, both authors feel that they need to protect the embodied woman in the world, though they do so in different ways. *Māṇimēkalai* acts in the world protected and supported by her own rejection of sex as a manifestation of her spiritual inclination, by agents such as a goddess and a Buddhist teacher who know established Buddhist teachings, and by the Buddhist institution of monasticism. Cēkṣiṭār protects Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ by her innate love of Śiva beginning with her birth, as she was born by her father’s practice of austerities (“Story” v. 2) and her love for the Lord manifested as soon as she learned to speak (“Story” v. 3). But he cannot draw on the religious ideology of institutionalized monasticism. *Bhakti* evokes both the discipline and the moral force of a classical Hindu renouncer (the *sannyāsin*), but action in the world is key to its definition, beginning with the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which was itself in part a response to Buddhism.⁴²

Instead, Cēkṣiṭār puts a pronounced emphasis on domestic propriety and his subject’s adherence to it. At the beginning of her story, her body is not only

“normal,” but perfect: She was born into a successful merchant family, and was as beautiful as an incarnation of Lakṣmī, wealthy, and devout.⁴³ She had a marriage proposal from a suitable boy as soon as she came of age; he had heard tell of her legendary beauty, since she did not leave the house after puberty.⁴⁴ Once married, she and her husband settled in a house built by her father for them on his own property (“Story” v. 12), a detail that forecloses questions of propriety when her husband abandons her. In the face of questions from her husband about the mango, she is cautious about saying anything that might contradict his perspective (“Story” v. 27). She does not leave her marital duties to become a full-time *bhakta* until she is granted her husband’s permission (“Story” v. 47). And, most revealingly, while she had been a devotee all of her life, her exemplary status is initiated by her rejection of her beautiful body in favor of the body of a *pēy*; on one level, as a female *bhakta* she is alone and no longer supervised by society, but, again, questions of propriety are foreclosed, this time by her unattractive ghoulish body (“Story” v. 49).

The context that defines such actions as “propriety” is the wealthy merchant community, which is socially upper level in terms of both class and caste. While Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi’s earlier biography reveals Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār’s gender and suggests the wealth of her community with his description of her as the “treasure” of the seaport of Kāraikkāl, Cēkkiḷār explores the social and religious significance of her gender throughout the story, in part through his elaboration of the fantastic mercantile wealth of her community. Although Cēkkiḷār never mentions caste affiliation beyond *Vaṇikar*, Puṇitavati (“Story” v. 2), who became Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār, has come to be understood as hailing from the Chettiar group, which is a community traditionally associated with mercantile and banking activities in Tamil culture.⁴⁵ Certainly, Cēkkiḷār greatly amplifies the saint’s connection to wealth in both material and metaphorical modes; his story is laced with images of commerce.

He foregrounds the wealth of the community in Kāraikkāl, as well as of Puṇitavati’s family and husband; in so doing, he makes use of the many resonances of the prefix *tiru*, which can mean “sacred,” “wealth,” or “Lakṣmī,” as he tells the story of a spiritually inclined wife who was born to wealth. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is born in a beautiful, prosperous community by the sea, populated by industrious and loving kin. Commerce, the worldly transaction of things, is paramount in the community’s self-definition and in its choice of appropriate husband for her. A sense of commodity informs the description of her. From the beginning, hers is a “body that matters,” and her biographer represents her as performing femininity in terms of her beauty, purity (Puṇitavati), devotion, modesty, and marriageability.⁴⁶ The text emphasizes that she “was of such great beauty that she was like an embodiment (avatar) of Lakṣmī” (“Story” v. 2). In Hindu mythology, as noted above, Lakṣmī is the goddess of wealth, which she bestows on mortals at her will; it is not “earned,” but instead embodied, wealth. Wives are commonly characterized as “Lakṣmī,” the wealth of the home, in traditional stories and in the popular imagination.

In proportion to its cultural value and validation, Puṇitavati’s youthful body is a contested body; one that is, at its maturity, defined by a necessary transition from

the stewardship of father, who is a synecdoche of the family, to that of husband, which enacts themes of ownership under the rhetorical guise of protection. Her body is contested because it is valuable, and needs to be properly placed. Perhaps it is a latent contestation, since the transition from father to husband goes smoothly, although a trace of the possible conflict is suggested by the father's insistence that his daughter and her husband live next door, in contrast to established traditions of patrilocality in classical Hindu texts.⁴⁷

Intriguingly, it is her observance of propriety in feeding a Śaiva mendicant who comes to her door that sets a series of identity transformations relating to her in motion. These transformations, which are signified by body-significant images and titles, are, in the order of the text: A girl who is pure (her given name is Puṇitavati or "pure one"), as beautiful as Lakṣmī (*tiru*), and devoted to god and family; a wife as the embodiment of Lakṣmī (*tiru*) who is devoted to god and husband; a local-goddess-like (*aṇaṅku*) figure when in conflict with her husband; a *pēy*, or ghoul, of her own volition and precipitating her journey to the Lord's presence; Mother (*ammai*), in Lord Śiva's reference to her; and saint (*ammai*) when she achieves her desired goal of sitting at the feet of the Lord, witnessing his dance while singing his praises.⁴⁸

As a young wife she establishes order in the household, including her regular feeding of mendicant Śaiva servants (*aṭiyār*, "Story" v. 15). Thus, she comes in contact with Śaiva renouncers on a frequent basis. This interesting detail pulls out a theme that is prominent in the saint's poetry – the presence of a beggar. However, in Cēkkilār's biography the beggar is not Śiva at all but a human devotee (*tonṭar*; *aṭiyār*). We can assume this is intentional in his narrative, as in other stories he does portray Śiva as coming in disguise to test the *bhakta*; I believe it relates to Cēkkilār's avoidance of fearful images of Śiva, described above, since in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṭṭar's poetry the beggar is fearful. And so, in the biography, the beggar is a human devotee. The items that she gives to the devotees are traditional items of hospitality, and her reception of the devotees with water to wash their feet (v. 18), food, and expensive gifts signifies that she holds them in high honor. As Stephanie Jamison has discussed, "Hospitality, the appropriate behavior between host and guest, is a theme that infuses Sanskrit literature and as a cultural behavior remains crucial to the present day."⁴⁹ However, she convincingly demonstrates that the hospitality relation may impose strain and danger rather than ensuring safety, not only in the case where the guest is unknown to the host, but even when the guest is known to be one of high status, for, in the latter case, the guest can demand more than the host can reasonably give, but the host is still obligated to provide for the guest.⁵⁰ Moreover, the role of host falls disproportionately on women, since the highest form of hospitality is to invite someone home.⁵¹ To those familiar with these paradigms, it is not surprising that the conflict that precipitates the saint's changed circumstances begins with an act of hospitality.

Her act of hospitality is to give the Lord's servant (*tiruttonṭar*) one of the two mangos that her husband had sent back to the home earlier in the day (see Figure 2). She did this because the curry or spiced lentil stew (called *sambar* today) was not yet ready to serve (no pressure cookers in those days to soften



Figure 2 Mural painting on the outer walls of the shrine to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār at the Somanātha Temple in Kāraikkāl. In one scene Punītavatīyār is feeding a Śaiva mendicant a lunch of rice and a mango. In the other scene she is secretly receiving a mango from Śiva while her husband waits for her to serve him the second mango for dessert. Photo taken by the author.

the lentils quickly); even though the rice was ready, the text implies that it was considered improper to serve plain rice, and this code of hospitality holds today as well. Also included in the code is that, as the mendicant is male, older, and hungry, he should not be kept waiting, and so she hastened to serve the fruit and fibrous pulp of the mango over the rice to him as a substitute meal. Her correct attitude is represented in the text as both her feeling that it is an honor to feed a man who has totally dedicated his life to Śiva and her happiness in serving him. Pleased with the meal, which was unusual, but served with a glad and appreciative heart, the mendicant left, satisfied.

The modest graciousness of the mendicant is implicitly contrasted with the excess of the husband. The husband gets the proper meal, including a dessert of one of the mangos, but he is not satisfied with that. Modern commentators tend to condemn Punītavatī's husband as being "selfish" for requesting the second mango. The larger pattern in the text is the patriarchal sense of ownership and entitlement. The text's description of the husband's behavior calls attention to the mediated nature of Punītavatī's role as wife, even when she appears to be acting by her own agency as a supporter of Śiva's devotees. The text makes it clear that the husband assumed his wife would vouchsafe both mangos for him; she is his subordinate and the mangos are his property. That it was a problem that she was

not authorized to dispose of his property, even for a good cause, is made clear in the text by Puṇitavati's perceived need to attempt to secure another mango in secret. To deny him his property would be to contradict him. She does not make the demand of a second mango to Śiva at this point: The text tells us just that she was worried and, as the Lord comes to devotees as succor, he spontaneously provided her with a replacement mango (see [Figure 2](#)).

When her husband challenges her to tell him where she got the mango that tasted so qualitatively different from the first one she is again silent, this time in an aporia common in religion; yet he dares her to speak:

The sheltered lady heard his words but did not answer. She thought that there were essentially no words to describe the greatness of the grace that is bestowed by the Lord who is the source of grace; yet she also thought that according to the way of traditional modesty it was not proper not to obey the words of her husband, and so she could not avoid answering. She stood, hesitating.

(v. 27)⁵²

The uncomfortable space her husband demands she inhabit is represented as, on the one hand, the impossibility of expressing the inexpressible and, on the other hand, a matter of disobedience or contradiction in not responding to his questions. Then, under the rationale that it is her duty to her husband, she decides to explain that the mango was God's grace; but her husband does not believe her. The narrative does not represent what she said to him; it only tells us that the husband did not believe it, and demanded that she procure yet another mango. This time, she speaks directly to God: "If you do not grant this by your grace now, my words will be false" (v. 30). The miraculous mango appears and, as though it, too, cannot be grasped, disappears before it touches the husband's outstretched hand.

The rupture in their relationship has several dimensions, all of them relating to patriarchal definitions of women's transgressions.⁵³ In the first place, she gives away something that is his property without being directed by him to do so. Second, if she speaks it will be viewed as contradicting him, which is disobedience, and so silence is preferred. Third, she actually does speak, reasoning that it is her duty (*kaṭaṇ*) to explain. Fourth, that her words could educate him is not a possibility; even when she does explain he does not believe her, which is a superior's expression of incredulity towards a perceived inferior. His incredulity preempts her:

Negative social representations of women's speech serve to buttress the valorization of silence as a desired "feminine" attribute; censorship, therefore, is not effected only through the explicit prohibition of actual utterance. Women's speech fails as statement, testimony or communication chiefly as the result of the successful operation of two kinds of tragedies: one, by being pre-empted, i.e. invalidated in advance; and two, by being discredited, i.e. rebutted after the event. By describing women's speech as, or ascribing it

to, lies, hysteria, comic volubility, empty gossip, or ignorance, patriarchy effectively deflects a great deal of its significance and force.⁵⁴

The petty power of her husband is undermined by God. Whereas her husband seems to have viewed her speech as “performative,” or non-analytical excess, God responds in a way that suggests he accepts her explanation of grace as true.⁵⁵ This story demonstrates that women’s speech is undermined by men not only when women dare to speak publicly, but when they are in the home as well.

After her speech-act and its validation by the mango that her husband could not grasp, the husband, who is astonished, perplexed, and afraid “rebutts” her by negating her in two ways. First, he imposes on his wife a new, and not altogether flattering, identity: He thinks of her as a “local goddess.”⁵⁶ The term is *aṇanku*, and its meaning is debated in scholarship.⁵⁷ Most fundamentally, it means “power”; it is a cultural assessment of natural objects. Thus, there can be *aṇanku* in mountains, women’s breasts, and serpents; in this regard it is reminiscent of the Japanese Shinto notion of *kāmi*. It is associated with the *pālai* landscape and all that the imaginary of Tamil tradition says that one will find there, including Korravai and *pēy*. Its context determines whether or not it is an awesome or a frightening power.

Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ uses the term *aṇanku* in her poetry, but disproportionately so, for it is used only once unambiguously in “Wonder” (v. 12), while it appears twice in “Decade-1” (vv. 6, 7) and twice in “Decade-2” (vv. 2, 8). In “Wonder” it describes the fresh quality of the flowers the Lord wears in his garland; in “Decade-1” it describes the dance the ghouls perform in the burning ground; and in “Decade-2” it describes the burning ground itself. In the “Story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ” it is used to describe the woman herself. The phrase used is *vēru ōr aṇanku* (v. 31), meaning “something other – an *aṇanku*.” I translate it as a “local goddess” because that is a traditional use of the term, and because the term *tey-vam*, Tamilized Sanskrit for god (*deva*), is used as a contrast later in the story. In Tamil literary tradition and folklore a local goddess is a capricious being, in part a protector and in part a force that, when angry, can cause illness, especially in children. The capriciousness of her power is imagined to be linked to her state of being unmarried and thus a virgin.⁵⁸

The second way her husband rebuts her is that he plots to leave her. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ is, in effect, unmarried at this point, since her husband resolves to leave without telling anyone (“Story” v. 31) and disengages with her for the time he must remain in order to prepare for departure. There is an implicit sexual dimension since he, for the moment, continues to live in the home but without “contact” with her, with all its semantic meanings of association, relationship, connection, and touch. It is an analogue to the scene with the disappearing mango; in Tamil tradition a mango is an emblem of fertility, and so this husband could not grasp his wife’s fertility. The sacred power of the virgin is, in this case, her relationship to Śiva. Her access to God is unmediated and thus the husband’s role as the mediating figure for his wife is destroyed, which is when he rejects her and plots to depart from her company. Significantly, he uses deception to achieve that end, lying to his

own family to get them to help him construct a ship for his alleged trading trip. His approach could not be in greater contrast to his wife's anguished truth-telling.⁵⁹

Later, within the affirmation of having moved to a different part of Tamil country, built another fortune, and married a new woman who is compared to Lakṣmī, he comes to view his former wife in a more positive light, recognizing that he made an error towards her, though he continues to think of her as an *aṇaiku* ("Story" v. 36). The story emphasizes his acquisitive nature by comparing him to the mythological lord of riches, Kubera. And here we see another striking contrast between women and men in Cēkkiḷār's text: Women are wealth, while men acquire wealth. Women are Lakṣmī, the embodiment of wealth and its source. Puṇitavati is compared to the goddess prior to her marriage, owing to the abundance of her beauty ("Story" v. 2), when she is a wife ("Story" vv. 19, 29), and when her relatives attempt to reunite her with her husband ("Story" v. 42); her husband's new wife is also compared to the goddess ("Story" v. 36). Men are like Kubera in that they earn wealth, with the difference that, in the mythological story, Kubera earned his status as lord of riches by performing austerities, while in this story the source is commerce. The "innateness" of women, much discussed in feminist scholarship, has dimensions of both social capital and spirituality in Cēkkiḷār's story, as Puṇitavati is also a devotee from birth, while her husband cannot acquire religious knowledge. But in his new context of acquisition, and especially upon his gaining a daughter (obtained with his wife – no austerities this time, "Story" v. 37), the husband begins to see things differently; he acquires a different perspective along with material goods and family.

He reconsiders his former wife specifically when he thinks about naming the daughter he has created with his second wife. Intriguingly, instead of viewing his former wife suspiciously, as a possible source of the evil eye of jealousy, he incorporates her into his new family by viewing her as a benevolent deity (*teyvā*) who is sacred to, and thus protective of, the family ("Story" v. 38), and then he names his daughter after her.⁶⁰ Yet, in the story's narration, there remains a tension in her identity, for when Puṇitavati's relatives come to tell her of her husband's new life she is again a fearful goddess (*aṇaikaṇār*, "Story" v. 41); and when she steps into the palanquin to travel to her husband, she is again likened to Lakṣmī (*tiru*, "Story" v. 42). This tension appears even when Puṇitavati's relatives bring her into her husband's presence as per their sense of propriety. Once she arrives at her husband's new home, her husband, in part out of fear, decides to prostrate himself before her ("Story" v. 44). He does so with his wife and child, to her kin's astonishment, and requests her grace ("Story" v. 45) – a concept he failed to grasp earlier in her presence at their own marital home. By way of explanation to her relatives, he calls her a benevolent goddess (*teyvam*; "Story" v. 47). By prostrating himself at her feet he relinquishes his former power over her life and instead submits himself to her power.

Significantly, when he calls her a great goddess he explicitly denies her humanity: "When I realized that this lady was no longer human – that she had become a good and great goddess (*teyvam*) – I left" ("Story" v. 47). In response, she asks Lord Śiva to allow her to become a ghoul, and her body transforms. By bowing

to the Lord and requesting a boon from Śiva, she returns herself to humanity. She does not want her husband at her feet; she wants to be at the feet of the Lord, and so she renounces the beauty that is emblematic of a benevolent goddess. Mentally achieving a breakthrough to the highest spiritual wisdom, she becomes an exemplary devotee. The “other” body of a ghoulish woman is her refusal to remain in the contested and commodified body of a beautiful woman. Her new body is a sign of her complete devotion to the Lord.

Cēkṇilār does not portray her as being disturbed by the social rupture. Nor does he portray the social world as missing her. The social world will easily close over the void left by Puṇitavati: Her husband has remarried, and her relatives will return home, though, intriguingly, she has a trace in the social world through her former husband's daughter as her namesake. She does not go home, but on pilgrimage to Mount Kailāsa. Her strange body is both a spectacle to and her protection from the gaze of the ignorant:

Those who saw her were amazed and frightened; they made a gesture of reverence and then ran away. Hearing them remark on the nature of her appearance, she responded: “If the leader of the gods recognizes me, why should I explain this form to the throngs of people who are ignorant of the truth?”

(“Story” v. 54)

Her ghoulish body speaks the truth (even if it is not understood by onlookers), even as earlier in the story her speech embodied the truth (though was not understood by her husband). The singularity of her body as truth isolates her.

Validating her social isolation, and incorporating information from Nampī Āṇṭār Nampī's earlier biography, Cēkṇilār portrays her as meeting Śiva on Mount Kailāsa. There, even Umā, the wife of Śiva, is surprised by her “body of bones,” but she frames it in terms of love by asking “what kind of love is this?” (“Story” v. 57). The explanation Śiva gives is that she “loves us like a mother,”⁶¹ and he calls her “Mother,” reaffirming her gendered identity in the ghoulish embodiment and again emphasizing her humanity. The story concludes with the saint at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, her request for the boon of watching the Lord's dance having been granted by the Lord himself:

Great love and enjoyment arose in her as she bowed before the sacred dance of the Lord who is adorned with honeyed *koṇrai* blossoms, and she was full of admiration. She sang about the beautiful Lord's dance of graceful movements in time with the drumbeat in sacred verses beginning with *eṭṭi*, *ilavam*, and *ikai*.

(“Story” v. 64)

It is a portrait of a woman that is both compelling, insofar as she attained everything she desired, yet challenging, as she is humanly isolated.

The fiction of femaleness

Where can a woman speak the truth and be perceived and validated as speaking the truth? Cēkḱilār seems to suggest that it is not in the social world, with its conflicted attitudes towards women. In interpreting Cēkḱilār's perspective, I agree in part with Vasudha Narayanan's important characterization of the disjuncture between the poetry of Tamil Viṣṇu-*bhakti* saint Aṇṭāl, in which she rejects mortal marriage in favor of marriage to Kṛṣṇa, and her memorialization in traditional biographies and current ritual practice:

While . . . the theme of Andal as a paradigmatic devotee is unquestioned, it seems to me that [the] Sri Vaishnava community subscribes only to selective imitation of certain features of Andal's life. What is important to note here is that the community has avoided the issue of making Andal a social or *dharmic* role model, and has instead opted to make her a *theological model* or a model of one who seeks *moksha*; she then becomes a model for all human beings.⁶²

However, I believe that Cēkḱilār's narrative does contain a message of social critique which stems from his representation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a *dharmic* wife and devotee in the first half of her story.

That the social resolution of her story (husband, relatives) excludes Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār challenges the *bhakti* premise of action in the world, and, not surprisingly, it is a feature of stories that seem to push at the extremities of who can be included in the community of saints: The one story about a woman that is told in more than a handful of verses (Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār) and the one story about an untouchable (a term that is now replaced by Dalit, "oppressed") (Tirunālaippōvār). These are the only two stories in the *Periya Purāṇam* that portray the saints as undergoing full bodily transformation, to my knowledge, and thus they are distinctive yet revealing as extreme cases of the tension between the social and the devotional that can be found throughout the *Periya Purāṇam*.⁶³ In both cases, the saints experience a lasting bodily transformation when they depart from the social world: She becomes an antisocial ghoul who pilgrimages to the Himālayas and then returns to Tamil lands to watch Śiva's eternal dance; he becomes a Brahman – the apex of the social world – who merges with the Lord. In both cases they become their opposites – she transforms from a beautiful woman who attracts others to a female ghoul who repulses others, and he from a reviled man to a respected one. These trajectories, while opposed in content, are similar in pattern. By making these two figures change their bodies the text calls attention to the contradictions between the bodies they are born with and their exemplary spiritual devotion; it highlights the contradiction between operative social valuations (and devaluations) and the validation (by biographer and by God in his representation) of their spiritual abilities and capacities. The biographer traces a divergence between the real nature of these people as devotees – both individually and as representatives of categories of people – and society's view.

Mostly, the *Periya Purāṇam* abounds in stories of less-than-total bodily change, especially those of male saints, from impoverished farmers to kings, who cut or

burn themselves or others – with the implied or explicit comparison to cutting or burning karma – and all of the victims of the harm are restored in one way or another. The revealing exception to the theme of restoration is that women are not restored when they are cut.⁶⁴ In contrast to the limit cases of woman and untouchable, when a male *bhakta* of caste has the wrong appearance it does not matter; for example, Cākkiyar, from an agricultural caste (Vēlāḷar, like Cēkkiḷār), temporarily became a Buddhist before he rejected that teaching, but continued to wear the monastic robes because only his meditation on the feet of the Lord mattered. The different way bodies are treated in the text suggests that, in Cēkkiḷār's view, the devotional heart is “the same” no matter the body, and any body can house such a devotional heart; however, not all bodies are “the same” socially. Devotional actions are undertaken in caste-inflected situations and locations (in a court, in a forest, etc.), but they are not represented as caste duty as in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. On one level, Cēkkiḷār is negating the significance of the body by investing the “inner self” with true meaning; this approach has recently been characterized by Cressida Heyes as

a model of subjectivity in which the concepts of the authentic inner and often deceptive outer are incorporated into the structure of the self . . . so the discourse of the somatic individual relies on a distinction between the inner and outer in which the former is conceptually prior to the latter, and an a priori truth about the individual.⁶⁵

On another level, by calling attention to the social responses to bodies Cēkkiḷār can be “read” as affirming social distinctions, and yet he reveals patterns – the “fiction,” as Gayatri Spivak has translated *māyā* – with which to see through the social judgments that are made.⁶⁶

In the text, Kāraikkāl Ammaiḃār has private thoughts that describe her motivation to feed the Śaiva mendicant (“Story” vv. 18, 19) and trace her worry over the mango (“Story” vv. 25, 27). She is first represented as *speaking* to the Lord and, revealingly, her theme is truth in speech:

The wife moved to the side and prayed to the Lord who wears a cobra as ornament, “If you do not grant this by your grace now, my words will be false,” and she obtained a mango by his grace. She gave it to her husband who was completely astonished.

(“Story” v. 30)

After this event, the next time she speaks – explicitly marked as such in the text (“Story” v. 48) – is when she requests the body of a ghoul (“Story” v. 49). The truth of her speech, which had been discredited by her husband when spoken by his beautiful wife even though it was affirmed by the appearance of a sacred mango, is validated for all to see by her bodily transformation to a ghoul. Her body is represented in the story as the mark of truth, unassimilated to human understanding that

is conditioned by social convention; when people she passes by comment on her appearance, she explicitly notes it as an issue of knowing the truth (“Story” v. 54).

Cēkṣiṭār’s story is not alone in locating a woman’s truthful speech in a female body that has been made unattractive or even repulsive. The Tantric texts that Loriliai Biernacki has studied also portray such an image, albeit with the significant differences that the Tantric texts are describing the goddess, not an historical woman; that the goddess is violated, in contrast to Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s self-willed transformation; and the Tantric texts are quite a bit later, from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Still, the resemblance in the stories is striking in terms of their marginalization of the gendered social capital of beauty:

When [the goddess’] speech revives, it does so upon a new and deeper level, etched upon her body with the experience of an irremediable loss. Her beautiful fair form is gone forever, but she herself becomes a more powerful goddess, capable of giving liberation. Evocatively, the text suggests that she can give liberation perhaps precisely because she herself has lost the illusory hold onto a static, mirror-perfect identity. Her own identity has been irreparably fractured. With the loss of her fair, beautiful skin color, she can no longer maintain the fiction of outward perfection and this knowledge is in a profound sense freeing, liberating. Perhaps it is this enlightenment, her own newfound liberating awareness of her identity, which moves beyond a notion of a “skin-deep beauty”—the limited identity of herself tied to her beautiful fair skin—that makes her a goddess capable of giving liberation to others, that is, passing on this knowledge and freedom of identity to others.⁶⁷

In its insistence that Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s words are true, Cēkṣiṭār’s story points us back to her own poetry, all of which, according to him, she composed after she had changed her body and, simultaneously, achieved a breakthrough in consciousness. What he does not take up, and perhaps cannot take up, is the specific ways in which her own poetry both invites and challenges others to develop their own devotional subjectivity.

The tension between women’s embodiment and speech that Cēkṣiṭār presents is a lens through which to view the history of women’s participation in making Hinduism. This is an issue distinct from the oft-discussed conflict between wifely duty and devotion to God in stories by and about women, though it is related to it. Let us note at the outset that a woman who follows the script of devotional wife, in which there is no conflict, is well represented in the literature. In Cēkṣiṭār’s story, Pūṇṭavati had for some time remained faithfully devoted to both Śiva and her husband, feeding both the lord’s devotees and her spouse; these activities were not in conflict. Hindu wives have had vital roles in rituals in Vedic times,⁶⁸ the medieval period,⁶⁹ and the present day.⁷⁰ When women gather with men or among themselves for rituals devoted to the well-being of their husbands and families, that is not controversial.⁷¹ The fault line appears when women presume to teach men or speak publicly. For example, Gārgi, in the classical philosophical *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, was erudite enough to judge the male Yajñavalkya’s answers to her

questions in a debate – and to publicly declare him the winner – and yet she was not included on the list of “sons” who are teachers, which includes Yajñavalkya and others who questioned him, at the conclusion of the text. Texts such as the *Tripurā Rahāsyā* and the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* of perhaps the tenth century present the wives of kings as fully self-realized by their own means, and yet they cannot get their husbands to understand the necessary teachings at first; it is only later, when it is not clear that their wives were leading them to enlightenment, that their husbands become enlightened and recognize them as gurus. These texts emphasize the private nature of the wives’ spiritual leadership through their personal discussions with their husbands (although, paradoxically, the texts themselves publicize their private speech).

The issue becomes imagined as a conflict between wifely duty to a husband (*strī dharma*) and devotion to God (*bhakti*) in some traditions of *bhakti* saints, especially Vaiṣṇava saints, such as Āṇṭāl from Tamil Vaiṣṇavism of the ninth century and Mīrābāī of north Indian *bhakti* traditions of the sixteenth century.⁷² In these cases the saint rejects mortal marriage, which causes anger within their families, and instead dedicates herself to God (specific forms of Viṣṇu) as a bride. Significantly, their poetry gave voice to their controversial choices; their own speech validated their view of God as husband (rather than the reverse, husband as God, which was the social standard). The substitution of god for husband – still notably giving a central place to the category of “husband” – is a creative resolution to the situation, but it is not one that became prominent in other stories of religious women adepts. For example, social tension is also evident in the story of Akka Mahādevī, a twelfth-century Vīraśaiva poet from Karnataka; as she became a *sannyāsin* (renouncer) this tension had nothing to do with a domestic circumstance but instead centered around her nakedness of body and outspokenness of speech.⁷³

The early female guru Bahīnābāī of the seventeenth century was in constant conflict with her husband because of her public devotional and teaching activities: conflict that involved factors such as gender, the contrast between her husband’s orthodoxy and her *bhakti*, and the fact that she considered an “untouchable” saint to be her guru. She herself spoke about all of these themes in her devotional poetry.⁷⁴ Intriguingly, a woman’s public religious activities are least controversial when her husband is deceased, as exemplified by the careers of Sītā Devī, of sixteenth-century Bengal, Gaurībāī, of the Gujarat-Rajasthan border in the eighteenth century, and Venkammā, in nineteenth-century Andhra Pradesh. Early twentieth-century female gurus were explicitly credentialed to speak publicly by male gurus: for example Sri Aurobindo designated Mira Alfassa, the Mother, as his co-guru and then successor. Female gurus since the mid twentieth century now uncontroversially possess the right to speak and teach publicly, and many have international reputations of spiritual achievement and teaching. These gurus exhibit multiple models in relation to the question of marriage, from husband-as-first-disciple to rejection of marriage to ignoring the issue of marriage altogether. In most cases, they present themselves as practicing bodily self-discipline and thus are akin to renunciators. The more controversial instances of women speaking today

are women who are possessed by a god or goddess, for they appear to lack control of both body and speech.⁷⁵

As a biographer, Cēkṣiṭār thus identified a crucial issue facing female religious adepts who publicly vocalized their religious desires and visions. In the very well-developed academic study of medieval Christian female mystics many related issues have been addressed, such as mysticism and the possibility of women's public speech,⁷⁶ mysticism and women's bodies and its critique,⁷⁷ and male biographers and female mystics.⁷⁸ What I have not seen so far in studies of Christian medieval writings is a male biographer who both reproduces and self-consciously reveals the limitations of social roles for women such as I find in Cēkṣiṭār's biography. Though Cēkṣiṭār's biography is a brilliant response to Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poetry, informed by his motive to depict her fully as a saint rather than condescend to her, there remain critical differences between the biographer and the poet. A key difference, as I mentioned earlier, is the relationship between the poet-saint and ordinary humanity. Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's emphasis is on humanity's approach to God; she does not represent herself as having extraordinary qualities that allow her to approach God, nor does she represent the *bhakti* path as accessible only to some. In contrast, Cēkṣiṭār emphasizes extraordinary events in her life, including miracles such as the mango and the ghoulish body, as well as her breakthrough in consciousness and her journey to Mount Kailāsa; revealingly, he consistently portrays her path as solitary. Miracles, in particular, point to difference; they highlight the difference between what is possible and not possible by human agency, as well as the difference between conditions as they are (such as social demands) and the possibilities that exist beyond them. Cēkṣiṭār can be said to have "miracle-ized" the life of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār.

In his discussion of Christian medieval female mystics and their male biographers, John Coakley notes a change in the construction of hagiography:

In the earlier medieval centuries, saints appeared to their admirers preeminently as the loci or media of a divine power that was expressed in miracles and great deeds of charity or asceticism. Newer saints still functioned in this way in hagiographical accounts, but they also appeared increasingly as people with a privileged subjective experience of the divine.⁷⁹

This characterization illuminates differences between the poet and her interpreter, though in reverse chronological order from Coakley's example. *She* was concerned with the exploration of her subjective experience of the divine, while *he* sought to foreground the miracle of her direct contact with Śiva, especially its culmination in what he represented as her bodily transformation. *She* emphasized the aesthetics of repulsion as a compelling feature in the creation of a devotional subjectivity, recognizing its power to transform, although she also praised beautiful images of God as heroic and fatherly. *He* retained her emphasis on the fearful, but displaced it from the body of God to the bodies of the saints – and in this regard her poetry, with its exploration of the fearful, may have been more influential on his project than has hitherto been recognized – and framed their life events with the

reassuring image of God the Father. Ultimately, they both valued challenges in the name of devotion, but their results were very different. *She* valued contradiction as transformative, especially the challenges of the self (love as both unity and duality; death as inextricable from life; beauty and disgust as matters of perception; posing questions as both elucidation and frustration). From her poetry, it seems that she lived her life exploring such challenges; whether she ended up literally witnessing Śiva's dance at a cremation ground or not, the cremation ground served as a challenge in her imaginary. *He* valued contradiction as transformative, especially the challenges of the social (the expectations encoded in specific embodiments; speaking the truth; incompatibilities between true devotion and ordinary life). In his story, these challenges come to closure through the creation of a miraculous, mythicized saint who ends up at a "resplendent" named town in the biographer's own native place.

5 A public's vantage

A religious festival is the domestic equivalent of a pilgrimage: Both disrupt ordinary, everyday time with religious significance and practice; both require bodily participation; both are connected to meanings larger than themselves, of which they instantiate a particular aspect; both require material preparation and use; and both require a substantial commitment of time on the part of ordinary people. A significant difference is that a festival is at home, while a pilgrimage requires travel. It is true that some people settle at places of pilgrimage, but then its status as a place of pilgrimage is not determined by them but instead by the people who journey to their place. It is also the case that the desire to attend a festival can provide the motivation for pilgrimage, but, from the vantage point of festival hosts, these people become, along with locals, a participatory audience for their scheduled celebrations. Even the title of Victor Turner's classic article on pilgrimage, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal," captures this distinction.¹ A festival does not need people to travel to it for its definition, although it does require a public. Whereas a single person can embody and enact a pilgrimage, a festival cannot be embodied and enacted alone.²

As I discussed in an earlier study of *bhakti*, these enactments of devotional religiosity rely on a premise of voluntary association; the songs of the three male poet-saints Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar encourage others to join them,³ and they describe various ways for others to participate, including service, singing, pilgrimage, worship, and festivals. People voluntarily participate by their own motivation of love and honor for the Lord, and they are the embodiment of *bhakti*. Here, for example, is Appar's description of a festival celebrating Śiva at the time of his sacred star Ātirai (December–January) in the prominent town of Ārūr:

He goes on his begging rounds
amid the glitter of a pearl canopy
and gem-encrusted golden fans.
Devoted men and women follow him,
along with Virati ascetics in bizarre garb,
garlanded with white skulls.
Such is the splendor of Ātirai day
in Ārūr, our Father's town!

Folk from far and near,
good men and rogues, and
those who pray every day for an end to disease –
our Lord of Ārūr is kinsman
to all those who cry,
“Oh my jewel, golden one, dear husband! My son!”
Such is the splendor of Ātirai day
in Ārūr town!

On every street, white flags flutter,
canopies studded with great bright gems
glitter, festooned with strands
of priceless coral and pearl.
Such is the splendor of Ātirai day
of the Primal Lord in Ārūr!

The ascetic god goes in procession,
led by the immortal gods
whose heads are bowed to him,
while lovely celestial women
with shoulders graceful as the bamboo
follow behind, and ash-smeared devotees
surround him, singing his praise.
Such is the splendor of Ātirai day
of the Lord in Ārūr!⁴

It is all readily apparent here: God at the center of honor; the jubilation of the celebration; the variety of participants (near and far, good and rogue, celestial and human, female and male); the opulence of the accoutrements that contrast with the ascetic body of the Lord and many of his devotees; and the “kinship” between the Lord and his devotees, and by implication among those gathered, by virtue of their devotion.⁵

As the poet-saints, including Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār (see, for example, “Wonder” v. 40), suggest in their poetry, one should keep company with those who dedicate themselves to Śiva, and many of the devotional actions they describe, such as reciting hymns, can be practiced in a group. Such a gathering creates a public for *bhakti*. “A” public is distinctive from “the” public, as Novetzke discusses:

In contrast “a public” implies a much greater flexibility of social organization. Warner outlines a handful of characteristics that help us identify “a public” when not qualified by its state-centered, hegemonic sense as “the public.” Warner conditions a public with these principles: publics (1) are self-organized; (2) exhibit a “relation among strangers”; (3) are both personal and impersonal in their address to an audience; (4) require “mere attention”;

(5) construct a “social space . . . by the reflexive circulation of discourse”; (6) “act historically,” which is to say they address the issues of their time – they historicize themselves; and (7) enact a project of “poetic world-making,” which is to say, publics give character to themselves and their participants, a character that is often then embodied in signs of dress and bodily display that recall the poetics of a public.⁶

To this list, Novetzke adds memory: “I would argue that publics, by their nature, remember and are constituted by a shared memory. Indeed, to append Warner’s list above, publics are systems of memory.”⁷ Novetzke persuasively argues that his appeal to memory as a frame for the making of *bhakti* tradition enables a more fluid study than the discipline of history, allowing him especially to foreground the public performance (*kirtan*) of poet-saint Namdev’s songs and life; the tradition of performance provides a coherence and a logic of transmission in keeping with indigenous values where to the historian questions of authorship and identity are convoluted.⁸ Moreover, *bhakti* traditions in particular are an active locus of memory, as Novetzke provocatively states: “I would argue that one finds in *bhakti* the longest, most sustained, most heterogenous collective exploration of memory in South Asia.”⁹

Novetzke’s method, as he is well aware, is best applied to developments after the life of the saint and, indeed, that is the subject matter of his book. “Memories” of a human subject are inflected with absence, even mortality. When the subject is divine, memory is deployed within a framework of active engagement. As I discussed in Chapter 3, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s praise for Śiva’s past heroic deeds is embedded within a devotional subjectivity that presumes an interactive relationship; in particular, God hears her praise as well as her questions. Thus, “keeping God in mind” through composing devotional poetry has semantic overlap with memory or “remembering God,” but there is incomplete overlap because the relationship is realized in the present. In contrast, those who remember the poet-saint, such as her biographer Cēkkiḷār and festival publics, are aware that they are memorializing her as part of the present-tense relationship they are constructing with Śiva.¹⁰

Festivals are excellent examples of the fluid domain of performance and memory, since they are public, they are voluntary, and they are dominated by ordinary, rather than elite, persons.¹¹ What poet-saint Appar could not have known when he sang about the festival was that one day he, as well as other servants, would as saints join Śiva as a central subject of honor in festival celebrations. That is, the performer of hymns would one day himself become bodily (in this case in the form of an icon) performed in a festival celebration. Evidence for the embodiment of the Śiva-*bhaktas* in painted mural and bronze icons comes from records of donations made to Rājarāja Chola I’s capital temple at Tanjavur temple, completed in his twenty-fifth regnal year (r. 985–1014);¹² the bronze icons were probably used in festival processions. His son Rājēndra Chola (r. 1012–44) created stone images of the *bhaktas* around the walls of his capital temple at Gaṅkaikoṇṭacōḷapuram, including a small image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār located under the left leg of the

Dancing Śiva (Naṭarāja's Dance of Bliss), witnessing the dance, as does Śiva's wife and the bull he uses as a mount, while Kālī dances by his right leg.¹³ As J. R. Marr has discussed, the bodies of the saints as represented in the stories from Cēkkiḷār's *Periya Purāṇam* were represented in stone carvings around the outside of the temple at Tāracuram (Dharasuram); Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is depicted on the exterior wall of the temple walking on her hands, surrounded by wild animals.¹⁴

In fact, it is the visual nature of festivals that most interests me, precisely because the visual medium is the festival's primary interpretation of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti*. While it is entirely expected that people might sing the saints' hymns (oral performance) in emulation of the *bhakti* saints, the visual is a significantly different mode for depicting *bhakti* via the saints.¹⁵ Of course, the *bhakti* hymns were themselves visual in nature, especially in their numerous descriptions of the body of the Lord; in addition, the poet-saints suggested that worship of the Lord with visual images is enhanced by participants' *bhakti*.¹⁶ However, visual performance is distinctive to festivals in celebration of the saints, in which their own bodies, in bronze, authoritatively instantiate *bhakti* in the festival performance. There is an important inscription dated to the middle of the eleventh century indicating that a festival to the sixty-three saints was performed, so there is an antiquity to festival celebrations of them, but I will focus on present-day celebrations that I have experienced myself.¹⁷

Today there are festivals of various size and duration that take place throughout the year in celebration of the Śiva-*bhakti* saints. One of the largest and most famous is held at the Kāpalīśvara Temple ("Lord who bears the skull") in the Mylapore neighborhood of Chennai.¹⁸ This "Festival of the 63" saints occurs on the eighth day of a ten-day festival to Śiva in the month of *Paṅkuṇi* (mid-March to mid-April), which culminates in the wedding of Śiva and Pārvaṭī on *Paṅkuṇi Uttiram*, when the *Uttiram nakṣatiram* (the star named *Uttiram*) coincides with the full moon day. This day is represented in Hindu epics and mythological *purāṇas* as the time when many divinities married, so for Śaiva devotees the wedding of Śiva and Pārvaṭī is celebrated on that day. The day before the "Festival of the 63," Śiva is processed in a magnificent, multi-storied wooden cart pulled by devotees around the four streets surrounding the temple. On the day of the "Festival of the 63," devotees process the saints on small individual wooden pedestals along that same route. The saints are processed backwards so that they face Śiva, who follows them. On one occasion (March 16, 2003) in particular of my many visits to this festival, I noticed that a number of devotees were lighting pieces of camphor on the ground before the pedestal bearing Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār; devotees honor many of the saints in this way, but that year they seemed to focus on her. The procession of the "63" is often remarked upon as the public's favorite part of the ten-day festival. I came to think of that day as "the people's day," since the procession begins with the saints and ends, hours later, with a folk dancer and icons of folk deities, including the goddess Muṇṭakāṇṇi Amman, accompanied not by the traditional temple music of drums and *nātaswaram* horn, but by folk and cinema-dance music.

Other festivals honor the saints as individuals. These are on a smaller scale than Mylapore, but they can still feel grand. The pattern is that the “saint’s day” is celebrated on the day that corresponds to the *samādhi* (“mystical absorption”; also a way of describing the final passing of a revered figure) of the saint. The celebration months are fixed in the Tamil calendar, but the exact day and date of the celebration, which corresponds to when the star that was believed to be ascendant at the saint’s passing is ascendant in a given month, will change since this depends on the movement of the moon and stars. One year I went to the saint-day celebration of the poet-saint Appar in the town of Puṅkalūr, in the month of *Chittirai*, which occurs between mid-April and mid-May. The saint-day of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is in the month of *Paiṅkuṇi*, and occurs two days after *Paiṅkuṇi Uttiramaṇi* day.¹⁹ At Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, the two-day festival culminates in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s spiritual liberation (*tiru vīti*).

Tiruvālaṅkāṭu: dramatizing spiritual liberation

Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s saint day occurred on Thursday, March 20 in 2003. The Tiruvālaṅkāṭu temple, which is officially known as the Vaṭāraṇyēśvara Cuvāmi Tirukōyil (“Holy Temple of the Lord of the Banyan Forest”), held a two-day festival in her honor that year beginning on Wednesday, March 19.²⁰ These two days concluded a major festival to Śiva that had taken place simultaneously in many temples, including the Kāpalīśvara Temple in Mylapore and the Maruṇṭīśwarar (“Lord of medicine”) Temple in Tiruvāṇmiyūr. I attended the festival at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu early in my studies of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, although I had been to this temple several times before, as I had for years been studying Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition.²¹ I knew that the festival was a celebration of the saint’s spiritual liberation, and so I went to the festival with one main question: How does one ritually dramatize spiritual liberation? I was very curious, as “spiritual liberation” has always seemed such an abstract, ineffable, mystical idea. There are visual images of spiritual liberation in the history of Indian art, probably the most famous being the images of the Buddha at his enlightenment – the image of him touching the earth as witness especially purports to describe the moments inaugurating his final awareness. In modern times, there are also cinematic dramatizations of saints’ spiritual liberation, such as in A. P. Nagarajan’s 1973 film *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār*. But how would it be rendered in a religious festival dedicated to honoring a saint’s spiritual liberation?

Given my focused question, my schedule and the schedules of my friends who wished to accompany me, as well as local people’s comments that the night-time events of the festival are the most impressive and significant, I planned to attend those events only, though the festival had events virtually round the clock for those two days, including religious discourses and music and ritual celebrations such as a ritual bathing (*apiṣṭham*) of the image of the saint; all of these events were subsequently described to me in meetings I had with a principal sponsor. In this narrative I will draw primarily on my experiences with joining the public that celebrates Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār.

Tiruvālaṅkāṭu is about sixty kilometers from Chennai (Madras), about five kilometers past Tiruvallur and eight kilometers prior to the town of Arakkōṇam. In classical texts, including the *Periya Purāṇam* biography, Tiruvālaṅkāṭu is frequently mentioned in connection with the name Paḷaiyaṇūr, as in “Paḷaiyaṇūr Tiruvālaṅkāṭu”; then, as now, these are neighboring towns. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Cēkkiḷār, the author of the *Periya Purāṇam*, says that there were “virtuous people who kept their promise” at Paḷaiyaṇūr, which is understood today to be an allusion to the story of Nīli. Today, the town’s association with Nīli is kept alive by a stone memorial in honor of her, as well as a small temple said to be where she took vengeance on her former husband.²²

The story of Nīli at Paḷaiyaṇūr was probably relatively developed by Cēkkiḷār’s time, so, as I suggested in Chapter 4, his silence about the female character Nīli can be understood as his avoidance of a controversial figure. The basic story of Nīli as we have it today in a Tamil manuscript of a narration–song–dance drama, the *Nīli Yaṭcakāṇam*, is the story of a murdered woman who took revenge on the husband who killed her. Versions of this story are known across Tamilnadu, as well as Kerala and Karnataka.²³ Briefly, the headman of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu prayed for two children and received a boy and a girl. At night, the children turned into ghosts and ate corpses and livestock; when they were caught, their father left them at the temple.²⁴ The two took up residence in a nearby forest, and the male ghost, Nīlaṇ, fought some of the townsmen when they attempted to take his tree, and was killed. The female ghost, Nīli, vowed to avenge his death.

It is revealed to the hearer that these two were formerly a Brahmin brother and sister. A married man who was returning to his hometown of Kanchipuram married the sister and then, wishing to return to his former wife, killed his new wife and their unborn child. When he saw his sister’s corpse, the brother committed suicide. The murderer was later reborn as a merchant who was told never to go to Paḷaiyaṇūr and Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. He does, and then Nīli exacts her revenge by pretending to be his wife that he abandoned on their travels. A group of virtuous men of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu hear their counterarguments, with the man claiming she is a ghou and the woman claiming to be his wife.²⁵ Ultimately, the men believe her story and lock the two up in a temple overnight, whereupon Nīli kills the man. When this is discovered the men of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu redeem themselves from their grievous misjudgment by immolating themselves in a ritual fire.

The geographical connection between the story of Nīli and that of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is unavoidable, and so people know the story of Nīli and will mention it in conversation, and it is discussed in informal histories of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu. Still, since Nīli is synonymous with vengeful wrath, the associations are uncomfortable; for example, two very educated women whom I interviewed acknowledged the story, but indicated that they did not view it as relevant to an understanding of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. The way I interpret the significance of the story of Nīli for understanding Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is to take up the issue of difference. As I discussed in Chapter 3, there is a disjuncture between the *bhakti* of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār and the activities of the *pēy* she describes at the cremation ground. The story of Nīli can be used to articulate some of those contrasts. For example, Nīli

does not choose to become a ghoul; she becomes one because she is murdered, and so it is both involuntary and negative. Also, Nīli is not represented in the story as watching Śiva's dance; she is too busy plotting and then exacting her revenge. She is like the preoccupied female ghoul described in Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's hymns.²⁶ Nīli's perspective is the antithesis of *bhakti*: She is absorbed with the injustices of the world and perpetuates them by her own actions, resulting in the suffering of virtuous people. In contrast, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār promotes the virtue of herself and others through *bhakti*. In understanding herself to have "joined the ghouls" in order to witness Śiva's dance, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār offers a distinctive interpretation of the nature of *pēy* that contrasts with the dominant associations, such as those instantiated by the character of Nīli.

Back to the road: Since Tiruvālaṅkāṭu is not particularly far from Chennai, by hired car a visit to the temple is an easy day trip on the face of it, but the real challenge is when one departs from the main road at the end of the journey; that last five or so kilometers is rough-and-tumble on a very poorly maintained road, and thus it is quite an uncomfortable ride. It is one of the complaints of local people that the road to their town and temple has not been updated. The sugar factory that was built around a decade ago did not provide any impetus to fix the road, apparently, and in any case the factory is controversial; local people say that it has both diminished and polluted the water in their temple tank. The "paved" road concludes and then a sand road, lined by small concrete homes with roofed porches (a traditional style of town planning known as *agraharam* ("garland of houses")), leads straight to the temple.

At this temple, one is supposed to visit the Kālī shrine first. One can do this in one of two ways. There is a shrine to Bhadrakālī (a beautiful form of the goddess) immediately before the entrance to the main shrine; thus, Bhadrakālī is like a traditional doorkeeper or guard at the temple. She also has her own, separate shrine around the back of the walled temple complex, near the temple tank. In the temple's origin story, the dance competition between Śiva and Kālī took place near this temple tank.²⁷ It is a small shrine marked by Kālī in the form of a trident (*triśula*), which devotees decorate with limes (on the spears), bangles, and flower garlands. Once I saw a group of women there who were about to sacrifice chickens to the goddess.

The temple to Śiva is surrounded by a high walled enclosure. When I inquired at the Archaeological Survey of India office in Chennai, the agency had not performed an official study of the temple. However, it is generally acknowledged that much of the temple as it now stands dates to the Chola dynasty era, as there are inscriptions on the walls dating from that period (first half of the eleventh century). In addition, there is the substantial and celebrated Tiruvālaṅkāṭu copperplate grant of Rajendra Chola, made in his sixth regnal year (1018 CE), which apportions land grants and privileges to people in the town.²⁸ The six-acre temple complex is entered through a columned entryway topped by painted sculptures of mini shrines with Śiva and Pārvaṭī seated on the Lord's bull in the center, flanked by their two sons Gaṇeśa and Murugaṇ (Skanda), who are in turn flanked by Śiva dancing the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* and Kālī dancing.

The entryway leads to a large courtyard with a stone pavilion in the center. This was the location of the first night's event in the festival to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār. I hired a car in Chennai and drove to my professor's home to pick up his wife, Mrs. Manavalan, who wished to come to the festival with me. Since it was a festival, I decided to dress up in traditional clothing: I had on gold jewelry and a silk saree, with my hair tied back. When I arrived at my professor's home, he took one look at me, exclaimed "Oh, I see you are really getting into it!" and burst into good-natured laughter, for he was so used to seeing me dashing around in a salwar kameez (tunic over drawstring pants). I started to laugh, too. His wife came into the room and defended me with her warm and protective sensitivity: "I think she looks very nice." Without much further ado, Mrs. Manavalan and I set off into the evening for the festival.

That night a bronze festival image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār was to be placed in a flower-decorated swing (*puṣpanāka ũñcal*), which is a traditional way both to honor and to provide pleasure for a deity in Hindu tradition, as well as to create an event in which devotees can experience *darśan* ("seeing and being seen by God"). Mrs. Manavalan and I joined the crowd seated on the sand and grass surrounding the image of the saint in the swing. The bronze image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār portrays her in her *pēy* (ghoul) form. As I have previously mentioned, in iconographic representation the description of the female *pēy* in her "Decade-1" hymn is taken as a reference to herself, and so frequently bronze festival images (*utsava mūrti*) portray the saint in this way.

A scholar who attended a talk I once presented on Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār raised the issue that her iconographic image as a *pēy* is "beautiful," and not fearful looking.²⁹ Hers was an excellent comment, for, in the words of a prominent art historian: "Women in Indic poetry, as in sculpture and painting, are invariably young and beautiful." Sculptures of Kālī, many of which portray her as emaciated, with a sunken stomach and with fangs, are an important exception, although this image of her is not favored in Tamil tradition, as noted by the art historian:

But in the Tamil region of southern India, while retaining her awesome powers, Kali is transformed into Bhadra-kali (Auspicious Kali) and is depicted as a beautiful young woman with uplifted breasts, smooth limbs, and a finely structured face. The only concession to her fearsome role is the fangs depicted at the corners of her mouth; in other ways, she closely resembles the beautiful Durga. Evidently, the absence of physical beauty was a concept that did not fit too comfortably with the general vision of the divine, at least in the Tamil country.³⁰

The bias towards beauty is widespread across cultures. The sentiment undoubtedly played a role in the Tamils' preference for the Bhikṣātana ("Enchanting Beggar") image of Śiva as a beggar rather than the more frightful Bhairava ("Terrifying") image of Śiva as a beggar; I discuss the Bhikṣātana image later in this chapter.³¹ As we saw in the poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār, she challenges the

emphasis on beauty by directly raising and embracing fearful forms of the Lord; by describing in detail the repulsive form of the female *pēy*; and by not putting emphasis on her own body. In contrast, her biographer extolled the physical beauty of the saint herself, then imagined that she virtuously renounced it for the body of a ghoul; he spoke only of the beauty of Śiva's dance, omitting mention of the cremation ground and gathering of ghouls.

If we approach the topic of bronze sculptures of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a *pēy* with some nuance, we can suggest that, overall, the image participates in beauty since it is symmetrical and proportional. In my discussions with contemporary bronze image artisans (known as *sthapatis*, "lord of building" in the sense of "master artisan") in Mahabalipuram and in Swamimalai, they emphasized the proportionality of the images, locating it as the generative source of a bronze image's beauty.³² They also emphasized the precision and clarity of the face of the image, which requires special skill on the part of an accomplished artist and is not a task delegated to junior artisans. Images that are suitable for worship are expected to exhibit beauty and perfection. Bronze images of all sixty-three saints were and are intended for worship; they are often displayed in corridors around the central sanctum in temples, from which they are taken for procession in festivals. Like images of the gods, the images of the saints are distinguished by their specific accoutrements and postures, the details of which are in this case drawn from Cēkkiḷār's narrative; for example, when Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is depicted as a *pēy* she is nearly always seated (and she is the only saint rendered as seated), alluding to her witness of Śiva's dance, and she holds cymbals to keep the rhythm of her music and Śiva's dance. Appar always carries a hoe, an allusion to the manual service he is said to have performed at temples. Campantar is portrayed as a child with his index finger pointing upward, evoking the scene when he told his father he received milk from the goddess Pārvaṭi.³³

Within this context of the overall proportional beauty of the bronze image we must note, however, that the image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a ghoul is very unlike images of beautiful women and goddesses, including images of the poet-saint herself as a young wife such as the one of her in a temple at Kāraikkāl, which I discuss later. The image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār in particular is found in a variety of forms in medieval period bronzes:

Her story allowed much scope for creativity and artists produced more than one masterpiece, generally depicting her in her bizarre, skeletal form, though very occasionally as the beautiful woman she was prior to her self-requested metamorphosis. A third style of depicting Ammaiṃyār was to place the skeletal mother on the pedestal of the dancing Śiva.³⁴

This variety exists even within the category of bronze images of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a *pēy*, which makes it difficult to generalize about this image. For example, the face of her image in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City is smiling happily,³⁵ whereas the one of her at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, has a furrowed brow and protruding fangs;³⁶ both these images



Figure 3 Bronze festival images at the Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple in Kāraikkāl: Śiva Nāṭarāja (Lord of Dance), a seated Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a ghou (*pēy*), a male devotee, and an elegant Pārvaṭī to the right. Photo taken by the author.

downplay her hair, with the former bald and the latter with flat hair, in contrast to the bushy hair depicted in a bronze from Tiruvārūr.³⁷ While the iconography of her as a ghou almost universally portrays her as seated – making her famous as “the only one who sits in the Lord’s presence,” according to many devotees – a bronze image of her standing from Tiruvāymūr is an exception.³⁸

The commonalities that exist, however, make it clear that canons of female beauty are being challenged. For example, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a *pēy* is routinely depicted with stretched earlobes, indicating that she once, though no longer, wore heavy earrings. The bronze image of her in the Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple in Kāraikkāl portrays her as seated (she is placed before Śiva Nāṭarāja; see Figure 3), with a peaceful, slightly smiling countenance, a bald head, hanging earlobes, and her palms pressed together in reverence. The hanging earlobes are a convention in images of renunciators, such as the Buddha or a Jina (and like them, she was from a well-to-do non-Brahman caste in her biographer’s representation). Also, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a *pēy* lacks the sensual beauty, commonly found in bronzes of women and goddesses, of the hourglass figure composed of full, round breasts above a narrow waist that immediately curves outward into ample hips. Instead, the ghou’s breasts are shriveled (in many images, such as that at the Metropolitan Museum, they are triangular; others, such as the Nelson-Atkins image, have shrivel marks above the breasts), her body narrow and elongated, and her hips nearly straight. Ironically, images of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a ghou



Figure 4 Contemporary reproduction image after the bronze image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a ghou (*pēy*) at the Tiruvālaṅkāṭu temple. This bronze was commissioned by the author to be made at Rajan Industries in Swamimalai in 2003. Photo taken by the author.

resonate with a point made by the poet-saint in her poetry: That an image can be beautiful according to other principles, such as artistic or devotional, that contrast with canons of beauty determined within social commerce. Of course, the poet made this argument with respect to the embodiment of Śiva; the bronze images of her make this argument with respect to her own body.

The image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a ghou (*pēy*) at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu (see [Figure 4](#)), which can be dated to the Chola dynasty (ca. eleventh century), is a masterful exercise in synthesis. Her face has a beautiful, peaceful countenance, framed by a blaze of hair. The poet herself says that she has “bushy” hair (*ceṭi talai*; “Decade-1” v. 11), and this has been interpreted by the artist as radiating waves behind the head, decorated with a jewel at the center. The lobes of her ears hang low, stretched by the heavy gold earrings she once wore. For this, the artist drew on an established iconography for depicting great spiritual human beings

who were previously wealthy but had renounced their wealth in order to represent Cēkkilār's interpretation of the saint as one who had been previously wealthy, but had renounced her life and her bodily beauty in the name of devotion to Śiva. That she is emaciated is indicated by her protruding collar bone, prominent lines at her ribs, and her long thin shins; for these elements of her image the artist has drawn on the poet's description of a female ghoul ("Decade-1" v. 1). Lastly, the figure is holding two hand cymbals, which are used in dance performance to keep the rhythm. This interpretation draws on the image of the saint at the cremation ground witnessing Śiva's dance, which is described in the poet's "Decades," while prioritizing her biographer Cēkkilār's emphasis on her two "Decades" as music that the saint sang before the Lord.

Notably, the image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu represents her as being very human, which raises a further issue regarding artistic interpretations of bronze images of this saint. An image such as that at the Nelson-Atkins Museum is striking in its representation of the saint as "other" by means of its depiction of her as a *pēy*, especially through the intense furrow of the brow and the presence of fangs protruding from her mouth. Other bronzes join this image in emphasizing ghoulish characteristics, largely by representing extreme emaciation through lines across much of her body and an open mouth displaying bared teeth: examples include images from Karivalamvandanallūr, Uṭṭatūr, Nāgapattinam, and Tirutturaippūṇṭi (the face of this last resembles the Nelson-Atkins Museum bronze).³⁹ In a more benevolent, humanized mode are the images *in situ* at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and Kāraikkāl, and the image from Tamilnadu at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. These interpretations revolve around issues I discussed in previous chapters regarding whether or not Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is understood to have actually become a ghoul. In her poetry there is ambiguity on this point; as I discussed in [Chapter 3](#), the portrait she herself draws of the *pēy* is in many ways incompatible with the devotional subjectivity she creates and describes in her poetry. The milder bronze images convey difference – she is not an ordinary, beautiful woman but one immersed in an "othered" god-consciousness – but they keep the figure very human. In contrast, the more fearful images seem to give weight to her biographer Cēkkilār's description of her bodily transformation, taking the poet's portrayal of a female ghoul as a self-description.

The Tiruvālaṅkāṭu image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a ghoul was regally decorated with multiple garlands of white, red, and orange blossoms wrapped around, making it impossible even to see the bronze save her face. She sat on the swing, illuminated by lamps and electric lights. Word rippled through the crowd that the swing was broken, so the image could not be pushed to and fro. Then certain people in the crowd began to form a queue, seated in front of the image. Two women standing near the image began to distribute large plates of fruit and cloth to the assembled persons, one by one. We understood from people around us that the organizers were offering thanks to local people for their hospitality and help by bestowing them with goods blessed by the saint, and in my later conversation with one of the principal sponsors this was confirmed. The sponsor added that it was also an opportunity for devotees to petition the saint; the examples she gave

of people she knew involved petitions to become pregnant. After more than two hours of this *darśan*, we returned home.

The next night we were joined by our friend Mrs. Champa Kumar of Chennai, who is both a classical vocalist of the saints' hymns (*Tēvāram*) and an artist who makes Tanjore glass paintings.⁴⁰ We knew in advance that the spiritual liberation of the saint was going to be dramatized in the early morning hours. My idea was that we simply sleep on the floor of the temple, as so many pilgrims do. I suppose I had thought of it in rather romanticized terms – sleeping in the courtyard of 1,000-year-old granite temple with the stars and nearly full moon above – and I was looking forward to it. Besides, there are no hotels in the town, so one would have to traverse that bumpy five kilometers again, which was daunting, not to mention the possibility that if we left the area we might miss the final dramatization of the saint's spiritual liberation. And so, sleeping at the temple had at least been my expressed idea as we set out.

When we arrived, the main road was crowded and festive. We went into the first courtyard of the temple complex, where the swing ceremony had been held the night before. There are reminders of Śiva's dance everywhere through brightly painted plaster statues of Śiva dancing the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* (left leg lifted straight towards the sky; see [Figure 1](#) in [Chapter 3](#) for an image of Śiva in this dance pose), including on the parapet to the entrance to the courtyard, above a small shrine in the courtyard, and on sundry small parapets throughout the complex. We walked under the five-tiered *gopuram* ("tower"), which was beautifully decorated with ropes of colored lights. This tower marks the entrance into the "outer *prakāra*," or "enclosed area." It is said that traditional Śaiva temples have five such areas symbolizing fundamental aspects of humanity, including the material body, the life force/breath, thoughts, intellect, and bliss (there are variations on this list). The *gopuram* also has a depiction of Śiva dancing the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* on the first tier. The base of the *gopuram* is flanked by sculptures of Śiva's two sons, Murugaṇ (Skanda) on the right and Gaṇeśa on the left.

Inside, the enclosed area holds the flagpole, found in all temples, that is used to mark the beginning and conclusion of festival celebrations. Across the courtyard, two interesting dioramas in the shape of barrel-topped *maṇḍapams* ("porch" or "canopy") flank a mini-*gopuram* of two tiers on top of one of the courtyard walls. The diorama on the right depicts the wedding of Śiva and Pārvatī (who is referred to as "Miṇāṭci" – or "Meenakshi" – in the painted caption); the one on the left depicts several scenes from the life of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār (an image of this diorama graces the cover of this book). Reading the sculpted images of her life from left to right: Her wedding, with Puṇitavati and Paramatattāṇ standing before a seated priest attending the fire; a standing Puṇitavati with her hands raised in supplication, suggesting both her general steadfast devotion and her specific request to the Lord for a mango; the moment when her husband understands that the mango is from God, with a seated Paramatattāṇ holding a mango lightly on his fingertips and a standing Puṇitavati with her palm vertical and facing him, suggesting the "fear not" hand gesture known from iconography; and lastly, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's encounter with Śiva, depicted by a majestic Śiva and Pārvatī seated on the mountain, with Śiva's

hand gestures indicating “fear not” and “granting a boon,” as they gaze upon the *pēy*-bodied emaciated saint walking on her hands below.

The diorama of Śiva’s wedding is a motif common to Śiva temples; the diorama representing the life of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār is specific to temple sites dedicated to her, including Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and Kāraikkāl. If we read these two sculptural representations in light of each other, as their location on the top of the same wall of the Tiruvālaṅkāṭu temple complex encourages us to do, we can see that the motif of marriage predominates: It is the sole motif of the Śiva diorama, and it frames the Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār diorama, which begins with her marriage to Paramatattan and concludes with Śiva and Pārvatī gazing benevolently upon her. One of the few devotees I spoke to at the temple who answered my question about what the saint means to her beyond telling me the saint’s life story also emphasized marriage.⁴¹ In this case, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār had become particularly meaningful to her when her husband became sick, since the saint was a devoted wife. The devotee, who was an older woman, indicated that she hoped that her own devotion to her husband would help cure him. Resonant with the message of the dioramas, the devotee’s explanation seemingly took inspiration from the saint’s wedding and marriage in Kāraikkāl, though this part of the story of the saint was not explicitly connected to Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and it was, correlatively, not being formally celebrated at this festival that honored her spiritual liberation.

We passed under the mini-*gopuram* and into the temple complex’s heart, its “inner *prakāra*.” Straight ahead was the narrow entrance to the main sanctuary, marked by a parapet sculpturally representing the celebrated places of Śiva’s dance in Tamil country. These images are enshrined in semi-circular decorative recesses, and painted captions locate the dances. Labeled number one is Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, identified as the *irattiṇa sapai* (Sanskrit, *ratna sabhā*; “hall of gems”) of his dance. The sculpture portrays a bluish-white image of Śiva dancing the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava*. This is the most distinctive sculpture, since the other four represent variations on Naṭarāja (“King of Dance”) performing the *ānandatāṇḍava* (“cosmic dance of bliss”), in which his left leg is gracefully raised in front of his right leg, which stands upon the demon that is ignorance (or, in an alternate interpretation, one of his retinue whose body provides a pedestal for his dance). Number two, to the right of the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava*, is Chidambaram, the “hall of gold” (*por capai*), an internationally famous temple where the King of Dance resides. It depicts a beige-colored Śiva dancing the *ānandatāṇḍava*. Number three, to the left of *ūrdhvatāṇḍava*, is Madurai, the “hall of silver” (*velli capai*); this image is also distinctive because a rose-colored Lord dances with his *right* leg gracefully raised in front of his left leg, which stands upon the demon that is ignorance. Flanking the ensemble are two images in which Śiva dances the “dance of bliss,” though they differ in painted coloration: To the right is number four, Tirunelvēli, the “copper hall” (*tāmira capai*), with a bluish-white Śiva; and to the left is number five, Tirukurālam, the “hall of the image” (*cittira capai*), with a beige Śiva that is very similar to the depiction of the Chidambaram Śiva.

From the Pallava dynasty era identification of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu and Chidambaram as sites of Śiva’s dance (which I discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), later dynasties, such

as the Cholas, had marked these two sites in their distinctive ways, and the Pandyas expanded the presence of Śiva's dance to realms solidly within their territory, including Tirunelvēli to the far south; Tirukurrālam, famous for waterfalls, to the far south-west; and Madurai, in the Tamil heartland. Together, these five areas form a *maṇḍala* ("sacred circle") of the cosmic dance that imbues Tamil country with its meanings and significance. The number five also correlates with the powers of Śiva according to Tamil philosophical reflections (creation; maintenance/protection; destruction; concealment; liberation).⁴² In addition, five is the number of elements according to traditional thought: Earth, water, fire, air, and "ether" (*ākāśa*). To my knowledge, only Chidambaram has sought to locate the dance of Śiva solidly within all of these frames: There, his dance is *ānandatāṇḍava*, which is the enjoyment he feels as he preserves the world he has created, and his manifestation at Chidambaram is *ākāśa* ("ether").⁴³

At Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* dance of Śiva is locally explained more in terms of mythology than philosophy. One finds this myth represented in the story of the origins of the temple (the *sthalapurāṇa*), now retold in books available at the temple, by priests of the temple, and by devotees. Scholarly interpreters have been concerned to demonstrate that this form of Śiva's dance and the story of the competition appeared first at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, and then at Chidambaram.⁴⁴ Another important dimension is that the story of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu represents an interpretation of several Sanskrit myths featuring Kālī (Kālī in Tamil).⁴⁵ These myths date to medieval times, and would have been available to the compilers of the temple's origin story, for which a nineteenth-century manuscript is extant, though the origin story could be much older.

In the Tamil origin story of the temple, Kālī's victorious battle against the demons Śumbha and Niśumbha, recounted most famously in the Sanskrit *Devī-Māhātmya* (ca. 600), is connected to Tiruvālaṅkāṭu; as popularly understood, this battle took place there.⁴⁶ According to the origin story, after her victory Kālī herself became out of control and thus destructive, threatening Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, which was a banyan forest. In continuing the story in this way, the Tamil origin story draws on a different Sanskrit mythological story, one from the *Liṅga Purāṇa* (ca. 1000), in which Kālī becomes out of control after her defeat of the demon Dāruka. In the Sanskrit story, Śiva, "to drink up the fire of her anger, cried in the form of a baby boy in the burning ground full of ghosts, through illusion (*Māyā*)."⁴⁷ In doing so, he stopped Kālī's dancing and calmed her down. The Tamil origin story replaces this incident with that of the dance competition, which in all tellings of the story took place at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, near the temple tank.⁴⁸ As we have seen, this dance is suggested in the poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. In the origin story, Kālī challenges Śiva to a dance competition. She seems on the verge of victory, but then is foiled. I reproduce here a telling from a current priest of the temple and then a telling from a nineteenth-century *sthalapurāṇa*.

In the frenzy of the competition, Shiva's earring fell to the ground. He picked it up with his toe and lifted his leg to the sky to put it back onto his ear. Urdhva means sky, and this dance is called urdhvatandava, meaning particularly the

dynamic dance, more gymnastic than the *lasya* or feminine graceful dance. Kali would have met his challenge, but for the wise counsel of the *devas* [gods] present who pointed out her feminine modesty, and she planted her feet decorated with ankle bells firmly on the ground in a dancing mode. Vanquished thus, Kali then engaged in her duty to guard the sacred rituals of the *devas*.⁴⁹

When the god [Śiva] suggested they try the fierce dance called *pāṇṭaraṅkam* [dance of Śiva when he destroyed the triple cities], she willingly agreed, confident of victory. Śiva pressed one foot on the ground and lifted the other straight into the heavens. As he danced thus, the worlds shook, the constellations fell from place like scattered pearls, the elephants, serpents, and mountains that support the earth grew weak, and Kālī fell to the earth in a faint. Grasping the earth with her long arms, she regained her power (*pṛiṭu*) and her breath (*āvi*). She watched as Śiva whirled around, his body embracing the worlds. So that the universe might not perish, he moved his foot and danced on. Kālī acknowledged defeat; shyly (*nāṇin mevi*) she worshiped the lord; she stood helplessly like a puppet, confused.⁵⁰

In both of the stories, Kālī remains at Tiruvāṅkāṭu as a protector. In addition to the two Kālī shrines currently at the temple – one in the inner space, at the entrance to the main Śiva temple, and one behind and outside of the walled temple complex, where she resides independently – there is a beautiful bronze image of her in the main sanctum. She is gracefully represented as in dance, her gaze upward, torso tilted, and both feet pressed on the ground, with heels together and knees pointed outwards. Nearby is a bronze of Śiva with both his left foot and his left arm and hand pointing straight towards the heavens.

Yet as distinctive as the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* dance of Śiva is to the temple at Tiruvāṅkāṭu, the form of Śiva as the Lord of Dance (Naṭarāja) is more prominent in the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ, since this is the dance she is presumed to have witnessed. Indeed, her bronze image is placed next to the bronze image of Naṭarāja to the right immediately as one enters the main shrine. As I and my companions went further into the shrine to take *darśan* of the main image of Śiva and the other gods inside the main sanctum, a woman called me over to tell me a “secret” of the temple. She pointed to the floor in a corner of the temple and said there was a secret tunnel there. It did look to me as though there were a trap door there. She said that the tunnel went all the way to Chidambaram, which is the home of the dancing Śiva, thereby connecting the two temples. Later, in an interview with an important festival sponsor, I learned about another “secret” of the temple. This woman told me that there is a secret image of Śiva Naṭarāja, one perhaps made of rubies, in a chamber concealed behind the wall before which the bronze image of Naṭarāja stands.⁵¹ This bronze image is found to the right as one enters the main sanctum, in a room that has doors made of iron bars. When the temple is open, these doors are usually unlocked so that one can see the images in an unobstructed fashion. The sponsor suggested that the wall behind the bronze

Naṭarāja may have been constructed to keep the ruby image safe. She claimed that “no one who has tried to break the wall has survived.” And there was even another important element to this “secret”: some say that at night, coming from the direction of this secret chamber, they can hear the chimes of the cymbals played by Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār and the tinkling of the anklets worn by Śiva as he dances with her musical accompaniment.⁵²

Soon afterwards, festival participants began to process the bronze image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār. In the festival context, however, all of the sculptural details were covered up by the image’s proper adornment for worship. She was dressed in a sari and magnificently adorned with dozens of garlands of brightly colored flowers. First she was processed on a palanquin carried on the shoulders of men around the main Śiva sanctum. The procession was illuminated by torches carried by devotees. The small parts of the bronze not covered by flowers glinted like gems in the firelight. A priest walked ahead of the palanquin, and musicians followed. We walked along with the procession, passing by the temple’s large banyan tree in the back corner of the complex.

The image was carried in procession out to the entrance to the temple complex, where a cart was waiting. Devotees loaded her into the cart, and a large light powered by a generator was shone on the image. Young men pulled the cart forward down the main road in front of the temple lined with the “garland of houses.” The procession was very slow, as it stopped at every house so that the residents could offer *pūjā* (plates of cloth and fruit) to the image and receive her blessings through these items. At the end of the road the crowd had fallen away, it was late into the night, and my friends and I thought we might get some rest before the dramatization of the saint’s spiritual liberation in the early morning hours. I asked the young men pulling the cart where they were going from that point and they indicated that they would pull the cart across the entire town throughout the night.

My plan to sleep in one of the outer courtyards of the temple was rejected in favor of sleeping in the car. Although I was disappointed, I did not press my friends on why they made that choice, though it seemingly had to do with both safety and propriety related to social class. Personally I would not have had the gumption to ask the driver to vacate his own car, but they did so matter-of-factly. Once in the car, me hunched over the steering wheel, with, as my friends insisted, the windows practically fully closed, I began to regret that I had not pushed the point, as it was so hot and uncomfortable. Nonetheless, at some point I fell asleep.

I was awakened by the voice of a woman telling someone to hurry to the temple. I awoke to see them passing quickly in front of the car. I roused my friends and we hastened into the main sanctum. People were lining the area just inside the shrine, where the bronze images are kept in barred rooms. We stood with others on a raised pillared platform, pushed by the crowd arriving after us. The barred doors of the chamber to our right were open, and the large bronze of Śiva Naṭarāja was fully adorned for worship. Suddenly a rolling metal door on the opposite side of the corridor from the Naṭarāja image noisily opened, revealing the image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār on the cart. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār stood facing Śiva Naṭarāja across the corridor. The crowd became excited; someone began singing the saint’s

Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam (“Decade-1”) and then I saw flames. Pieces of camphor had been set on the floor in a straight line from the Naṭarāja to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, and both ends were lit simultaneously. As we watched, the flames raced towards each other from the opposite ends; when they met in the middle, their flare signified the moment of the saint’s spiritual liberation (*mukti*). It was a stunningly dramatic moment; a perfect image of the joining of the essence of the human and the divine into an effulgent identity.

Kāraikkāl: when ritual tells the story

I went to the coastal town of Kāraikkāl, which lies some 300 kilometers south of Chennai in Tamilnadu, south India, in summer 2006, with a specific research question.⁵³ My question was, “How is the biography of a classical Tamil female saint told in a festival performance?” I thus had a very specific research question based on extensive prior study of the host culture and this specific tradition within it; I was not adopting the stance of a “neutral” observer, yet I was also not imposing a question that was unrelated to the host culture.⁵⁴ The domain of encounter was the annual festival celebration (“mango festival,” *māṅkaṇiṭ tiruviḷā*) of the life of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār.⁵⁵

I had recently translated the twelfth-century biography of her that is included in the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* canon (in [Appendix 2](#) in this volume), and so I was quite well aware of the way the story is told in that authoritative narrative format. Moreover, this canonical story mediates the Tamil population’s knowledge of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār to a vastly greater extent than her own poetry. It was thus not at all an imposition to suggest that the mango festival was a “telling” of the biography. In keeping with recent discussions of performing and writing ethnography, I kept my viewpoint in the foreground through my academic question, and I kept the local participants’ viewpoint in the foreground through primarily observing their “telling” of the story.⁵⁶ While I believe that studies that seek to record an event for posterity, developing a standardized ethnographic narrative of a performed event, can be helpful, I viewed my experience as contingent and open to impact upon my personhood.⁵⁷ In addition, one of my main arguments in interpreting *bhakti* is to understand it as a tradition that foregrounds embodiment and experience.

The two advantages I saw to adopting this kind of open, yet articulated inquiry were: (1) That while I was undertaking a comparative project between a textual representation and a performative representation, I was not prioritizing one above the other, but instead recognizing two distinctive arenas for the telling of the story of the saint; and (2) I was leaving space for diverse details from the ethnographic experience to have a meaningful status in contributing to the question. This latter dimension is now often referred to as “discovery” in ethnography.⁵⁸ If I had gone to the festival with a thesis already developed, rather than proposed, this space would not have existed. I was trying to decenter the linear model of “thesis–example–conclusion” in favor of leaving possibilities of experience and reflection open. In this connection, I avoided contacting male officials of the event, even though I knew people in the Chennai Tamil Śaivism group who

could have provided me with such contacts. I was not seeking privileged, prefabricated answers, my own or anyone else's. And besides, I was already negotiating one – the canonical rendering of the poet's life story by a male author.

It is this theme of differences between textual and ethnographic experiences that I take up here, exploring the linear construction of the former and the multi-dimensional construction of the latter. In traditional biographical narratives, such as the biography of the saint, the reader is led along in a linear fashion as information about the subject is revealed incrementally. This path mirrors its subject, as a biography is a person's life that unfolds incrementally over time. Similarly, the festival events were organized around the life story of the saint and thus there was, overall, a linear progression in the representation of events in her life through cause and effect. In fact, the festival organizers produced a schedule of events that listed specific incidents in the saint's life and designated a time that each would be performed during the festival; the festival would begin with the saint's marriage and end with her spiritual attainment of Lord Śiva.

But there are differences between biography and festival, too. The festival organizers' self-consciousness of such differences was revealed in an overall view of the festivities that was written on the wall of the town's formidable Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple in both Tamil and English. The English version cautioned that: "These events are celebrated symbolically with all enthusiasm traditionally by devotees and the temple authorities every year." Thus, the dramatization would be selective or "symbolic" and not literal or comprehensive. From the detailed three-day schedule of events it was clear that ritual, including *pūjā*, wedding ceremonies, and processions, was a prominent element in the festival's symbolic repertoire. While the ritual drama shares an emphasis on the visual with dramatic performances such as a play, and both contrast with text in that emphasis, this festival would tell the story of the saint primarily through establishing a series of moments for worship.

With its prioritization of ritual came another telling feature of the festival, that its performance of the biography would take place in multiple ritual venues across the town, including the large Śrī Siddhi Vināyaka Ālayam to Gaṇeśa near the river; the majestic Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple to Śiva on the town's main thoroughfare; the Somanātha Temple to Śiva that houses the shrine to Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār and sits just down the street from the Kailāsanathan Temple; the small Vināyaka (Gaṇeśa) Temple that sits in a bazaar in a different quarter of town; and the streets of the town, where the main characters of the story were processed.⁵⁹ In this type of performance, a *ritual storytelling*, no one sat still for long.

The phrase "ritual storytelling" has been theorized by Kiran Narayan in an article on women and storytelling.⁶⁰ Narayan uses the phrase to describe storytelling by a female expert following ritual performances; the stories are told in their "actual ritual setting" and are

peculiar to the two rituals that had just been performed ... the story associated with the lamps which women had sent floating downstream, and the story featuring the berry bush which they had just worshipped. Now, women

were asking for stories more generally associated with this ritual period in November known as the Five Days of Bhishma.⁶¹

In her example, an old woman who was an acknowledged expert at storytelling told a story about a berry tree that seemed to explain the reasons for women's ritual worship of the berry tree, including themes such as serving others, hospitality, and unselfish behavior.

I mean "ritual storytelling" in a different way; as ritual that is inextricably involved in the actual telling of the story. So, in Narayan's example ritual worship provides the occasion for a telling of the story that takes place in a performance separate from the ritual; in my example of the mango festival the story provides the frame for the ritual and both story and ritual are performed simultaneously such that the ritual becomes the way that the story is told. Ritual storytelling changes the story: It brings to the fore elements such as the visual, material, and public experience that are distinct from a written narrative. It also has its own priorities, foremost among them the shared experience, and chooses to italicize its own selected moments of the story.

I had been to the Śiva temple that houses the shrine to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār on several prior occasions to take her *darśan* as I went about my many years of study of the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* saints, but never before had I attended the annual festival to her held in the Tamil month of *āṇi* (mid-June to mid-July; the festival commences two days before the full moon). The published schedule indicated that the three-day festival would open with a *pūjā* (worship with images) to Lord Viṣṇēśvara (Gaṇeśa) on Saturday, July 8 at 6:30 p.m., which would be followed by a procession of "Paramatatta Ceṭṭiyār" (the saint's husband, here identified by caste though he is not explicitly identified as such in the biography) from the Śrī Cittivīṇāyakaṃ Ālayam (around a half-mile south down the main road, nearly to the river) to the town, specifically, the Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple on Bhāratīyār Street, the main north-south road. The schedule was continuous from Saturday evening until very early Tuesday morning, and I could not attend everything myself, even with the festival's carefully scheduled breaks in the afternoon to beat the lingering summer heat. But I did attend this evening procession, which was magnificent, since India has a genius for light.

An icon of Paramatatta Ceṭṭiyār stood in a raised open palanquin on a chariot drawn by plastic horses and pulled by devotees. Richly decorated in a ritual style, with ornaments and numerous flower garlands, he was illumined by bars of colored light powered by a generator that trailed behind. He was accompanied by a retinue of jubilant small boys carrying large paper spears. I joined the procession as the chariot circumambulated the Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple on the streets surrounding it, and the small boys told me that they each had been paid ten rupees to process. They told me excitedly that Paramatattan had come from far away, and would marry Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār tomorrow. There were a number of people around, though not what I would consider a crowd by Indian standards. The section of Bhāratīyār Street between the two Śiva temples was lined with sellers of all manner of goods, from glass bangles to home supplies, so people were engaged

in a diversity of activities. The mood was busy and festive. It was getting late when we completed one circling of the temple, since there had been a delayed start, and it looked as though the palanquin might go around several more times; since I had to get up early the next morning, I did not stay until the husband-to-be was laid to rest in the temple for the night.

At 7:00 the next morning (Sunday) I went to the Somanātha Temple, which is virtually across Bhāratīyār Street from the Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple, to witness a *pūjā* ceremony to the saint, originally named by her family as Puṇitavati (“the pure one”; also Puṇitavatiyār, with a respectful suffix), held at the temple’s tank. This is the Śiva temple that houses the shrine to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, as well as a shrine to Vināyakar (Gaṇeśa), in its forecourt. The purpose of the ceremony was to prepare her for her wedding later that day. There were a few people sitting around. While I waited for the ceremony to begin I took a walk around the shrine to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. It is a small free-standing temple topped by a wide stone cap that has central images of female figures, one of which is the saint seated cross-legged with her hands pressed together in reverence.⁶² The entrance into the shrine is up a few steps, the doorway flanked by paintings on either side of female figures holding trays of mangos as though offering them to the saint. The stairs lead into a small chamber; the black stone icon is in the next chamber, separated by a metal grid that is open only when worship by a priest is undertaken. Later in the festival I asked a priest, who appeared to be non-Brahmin, to perform *ārati* (waving a tray of fire before the image) to the saint for me, which he did. The icon is of the saint as a beautiful young woman. She is standing on an elaborate platform and back plate made of silver hammered into motifs of lotus flowers and petals. When the priest held the flame to the image it was brilliantly reflected in the silver. Her right hand holds a cylindrical object that was difficult to make out in the darkness. As compared with other iconographies of the saint as a young woman, this object did not appear to be in the shape of a mango, but more like a rolling pin (which is used against a flat mortar to hand-grind spices and vegetables in traditional south Indian cooking), which would be in keeping with other images in which she holds a cooking implement. Her left hand is open in a gesture of giving.

Around the outside of her shrine is a series of wall murals that tell the story of her life through scenes selected from Cēkkilār’s story. These were painted by one M. C. Cuntar, a *sthapati* from the nearby town of Cīrkālī, probably in 1981, when there was a special dedication sponsored by V. Rāmacāmiṃṇai.⁶³ The scenes, counterclockwise from the entrance, are: her parents; her parents rocking their baby daughter in a swing; Puṇitavatiyār at her wedding, clasping her husband’s hands in front of the fire tended by a priest; her husband, in his shop with jewelry and weights, telling his assistants to bring the two mangos to his home; Puṇitavatiyār receiving the mangos at her home; Puṇitavatiyār respectfully greeting at her doorway a Śaiva mendicant who is adorned with emblems of Śiva such as *rudraksha* beads and three lines of ashes on his forehead and arms; Puṇitavatiyār serving a meal of rice and a mango on a banana leaf to the mendicant inside the home (this image can be seen in Figure 2 in Chapter 4); her husband

Paramatattan sitting before his meal on a banana leaf with Puṇitavatiyār separated by a wall in the kitchen receiving a mango from a divine light (this image can be seen in Figure 2 in Chapter 4); Paramatattan, taking a step as if to leave, as his wife receives a mango by a divine light in front of him; Paramatattan in a boat on the water; Paramatattan seated with his new wife at their wedding; Paramatattan, his new wife, and their young daughter; Puṇitavatiyār in a palanquin being taken by her relatives to confront her husband; Paramatattan, his new wife, and their daughter prostrating themselves before Puṇitavatiyār as she, wide-eyed in astonishment, gestures as if to deflect the honor; Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as an emaciated ghoul (*pēy*) with scraggly white hair, her red sari of previous images replaced by a red cloth loosely wound around her body; the ghoul walking on her hands up a long flight of steps on snowy Mount Kailāsa, observed by Śiva and Pārvatī; Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār seated at the feet of Śiva Naṭarāja while a host of divine followers look on. The last scene has printed words indicating that she is the mother (*ammaiyār*) who will never be reborn because she attained the Lord through love (*aṇpu*), evoking one of the three wishes Cēkkiḷār has the saint request of Śiva.

Then the musicians came, and shortly thereafter the Brahmin priests arrived. To the music of the *nātaswaram* (a traditional double-reed wind instrument) and the drums, the freshly adorned bronze image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as Puṇitavatiyār was placed on a palanquin and carried on the shoulders of devotees to the temple tank next door. This image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as Puṇitavatiyār is beautiful (see Figure 5). In contrast to her image as a ghoul at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, she is standing, has a feminine figure, and wears elaborate round earrings with her long hair gracefully styled. In her right hand she holds a mango, while her left bears a flat disk that is either a plate or an implement for serving food. Dressed in a sari, she was the image of the perfect woman and devotee.

A very small group of people assembled in front of the image by the side of the tank. There, the priests performed what I call an *abhiṣekam* (bathing the image) of transference; this means that a substitute, rather than the icon itself, was bathed. While the icon remained in the shouldered palanquin, the priests poured sacred substances such as milk and sandal water into a brass pot set on a low table on the ground in front of the icon, reciting mantras while they did so. After this “bathing,” they dressed the pot with jasmine and sacred grass. At this point a singer (*ōṭuvār*) stepped forward and sang a song in Tamil describing the life of Puṇitavatiyār, from her marriage to her sitting at the feet of the Lord, with the cadence of a traditional Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* hymn (such as those of the male poet-saints whose compositions comprise the *Tēvāram*). Then the priests performed *ārati* (waving a flame before the image), and the sponsor stepped forward to receive the blessings. Back inside the temple, I spoke briefly to a son of Ku. Ma. Kurucāmi Pillai, the sponsor of this rite, who was also listed as the sponsor of the procession the night before and the wedding that would follow that afternoon. He told me that the wedding was very important; then he spontaneously offered to provide me with a seat if I arrived back at the temple by 9:30 a.m.

For several reasons, including my impression that the festival was not that crowded, and that I preferred to mill with the crowd rather than sit in one of the

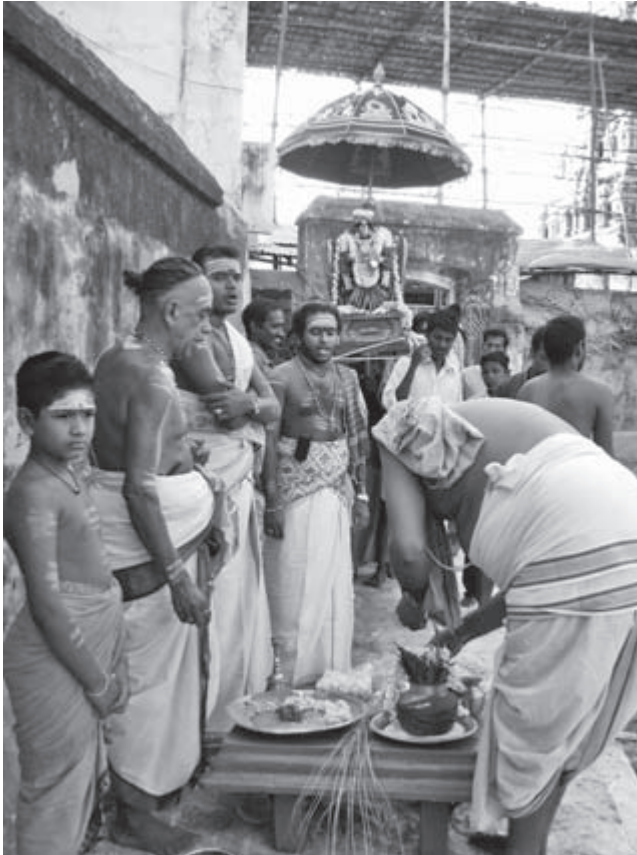


Figure 5 Bronze image of Punitavatiyār in a palanquin next to the temple tank of the Somanatha Temple in Kāraikkāl. The ritual is to honor and prepare her for her marriage, which will be ritually enacted later that morning during the Mango Festival celebrations. Photo taken by the author.

red plastic chairs of honor (though it was gracious to have been invited), I arrived after 9:30 but still more than one hour before the scheduled 11:30 start time of the wedding (*Tirukkalyāṇam*, listed in bold on the program). This proved to be a mistake, as the hall of the temple, decorated with a large festival mural of the saint's wedding along with smaller scenes from her life story, was completely filled. It was not that the hall was so crowded that I could not have squeezed in, as I have done at many festivals; rather, there were guards posted at the entrance to the hall who would not let me in. I will admit that for a fraction of a second I regretted my avoidance of the culture of honor; it would have come in handy at this moment. But since the guards would not in any case have permitted me to go back on my principles, I stood at the side in a jostling crowd, craning to see the ritual.

Here is where my own reliance on the biography had misled me. *Textually*, the wedding is only briefly mentioned in two verses, with specific rites left undescribed.⁶⁴ *Ritually*, a wedding is a grand, celebrated ceremony in a culture that worships marriage, as evidenced by high marriage rates and by the storylines of Bollywood films, and so I should have anticipated that the wedding ritual of the saint and her husband would be a huge draw.⁶⁵ Also, even at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu a woman had found special significance in the saint as a wife, as I discussed earlier. People identified most with that aspect of the story that they would assuredly experience within their own lives. The saint's embodied experience, and the audience's, intersected in the marriage.

In addition, the town of Kāraikkāl would clearly celebrate its own presence in the biographical story and, indeed, I did get the impression in speaking with people that an element of the festival was local pride; this would mean that all rituals depicting events up until the part of the story when the saint leaves Kāraikkāl to meet her husband and then to travel to Mount Kailāsa and Tiruvālaṅkāṭu would receive celebrated representation at this festival. One instance of this theme of local pride was the sponsorship of the festival events: Most of the events were sponsored by local businessmen, along the lines of the sponsor of the early morning *pūjā* to the saint mentioned above.⁶⁶ The last event of the festival was sponsored by the shopkeepers of Kāraikkāl, a lesser class of businesspeople, a point to which I shall return towards the end of this essay. In a seeming absence of members of the Chettiar caste of traditional and highly successful businesspeople highlighted in the story of the saint, the Piḷḷai males of the town seemed to take their place in terms of representing business and sponsorship.⁶⁷ Pride of place was rendered in a different key when I spoke to women I encountered randomly throughout the festival (in crowds, at my hotel, etc.); they indicated either that they were from Kāraikkāl or that they were visiting family in the town. Thus, they used the festival of a female saint who was married in her own hometown as an opportunity to return to their hometown to pay their family and ancestral land a visit.⁶⁸ Several women told me that people make vows to the saint and then come here to fulfill them, especially vows for children. Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār is thus further assimilated to contemporary desires of her public, since her story does not involve children.

A key element of the wedding ceremony was the moment when the priest tied the wedding *tāli* around the neck of the bronze image of Punitavatiyār; after that, an *ārati* concluded the event, which was followed by a rush to receive portions of the blessed food (*prasād*). I avoided the crush and felt I was rewarded fifteen minutes later by an unencumbered viewing (*darśan*) of the newly married couple, displayed in all of their finery in the hall. At midnight the couple was to be processed around the streets in a “pearl” palanquin. However, occupying prime time that night, and the next morning, was a celebration of Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana, the Enchanting Beggar, “a figure manifestly based on the human wandering ascetic,” who plays a prominent role in Śaiva *bhakti* poetry, temple iconography, and philosophy.⁶⁹ On the Sunday evening he was gloriously adorned with flowers, carried on a palanquin, and processed around the large courtyard of the Śrī Kailāsanathan



Figure 6 Night-time procession of Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana (Enchanting Beggar) at the Śrī Kailāsanathan Temple in Kāraikkāl. Photo taken by the author.

Temple to great crowds and fanfare (see Figure 6).⁷⁰ On the Monday morning he was processed in an elaborate wooden chariot drawn by devotees around the streets of the town, and people threw mangos in his wake.

Owing to this ritual focus, it became clear to me that Śiva Bhikṣāṭana was being understood as the beggar/mendicant who visited the home of Puṇitavatiyār and, very significantly, precipitated her husband's separation from her, although the processions of Śiva Bhikṣāṭana took place prior to the festival dramatization of those events of the story; the processions of the Supreme Beggar were thus anticipatory. In Cēkkiḷār's biography it is nowhere mentioned that the mendicant whom Puṇitavatiyār feeds is Śiva; he is represented in the text as simply a devotee of the Lord. The textual story says quite simply that a holy servant of the Lord came to the saint's home and she fed him lunch using one of the two mangos her husband had sent to the house. The terms used in the text are *tiruttoṇṭar*, "holy servant" ("Story" vv. 5, 17, 18, 21), and *aṭiyār*, "servant" ("Story" vv. 3, 15, 18, 19, 20, 49), which are terms widely used in the text to refer to a human devotee to Śiva; it is not a term that is used to designate the Lord.⁷¹ However, the festival transforms this figure into Śiva as the mendicant Bhikṣāṭana. In a way, the festival reaches back to the poetry of the saint in this emphasis, recovering her own prominent meditations on Śiva as a Beggar. The festival sets the poet's multiple visions of Śiva into a chronology rather than a simultaneity by emphasizing the Beggar at this point in the story rather than the Dancer, on whom the poet also put much emphasis.

The reason behind the festival's emphasis on the Beggar is not necessarily a self-conscious reaching back to the poetry almost, as it were, over the protests of her biographer, but so that a significant period of awe may be devoted to God as the primary subject of the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's signification. This representation of the mendicant as God in the ritual celebration, as well as in commentaries on the biographical text, has become widespread, revising the biography in the public imagination of this story.⁷² The transformation of this character in the ritual enactment, also signified by another layer of disjuncture between God's incarnation as a poor beggar in contrast to his richly royal ornamentation at the festival, a contrast noted by Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* poets, brought home for me the notion that the entire festival was structured around what I will call moments of awe.⁷³

Certainly the Hindu theological concept of *darśan*, or seeing and being seen by the deity, goes a long way towards explaining the significance of the moments of awe made possible by such processions. What I would like to stress is a more sociological significance to the visual dimension of the processions. The primary effect of this ritual dramatization is visual; the participants are walking *to* something that is happening that can be watched. These events are less re-enactments of elements of the story than they are opportunities for awe. In Philip Fisher's elegant book on wonder, he describes visual contact as an "all-at-once" experience, and contrasts it to the linear progression of literature:

In the arts of time what we call the narrative aspect is just the sequence of details, drawn together by syntax into a set of stressed relations. One after another the details are presented for attention in a sequence determined by the author or the director in a film. By contrast, in all-at-once visual experiences like wonder, all details are present at once. We first take in the whole. The next step of the experience, for any viewer, is to create her own narrative, by looking now at this detail, then at that, changing scale to larger or smaller details, inventing in each experience a self-determined history of attention.⁷⁴

There are two components to his argument: (1) In a visual experience the viewer takes in the whole at one time, while in a narrative experience the reader takes in details in a serial fashion; and (2) In a visual experience the viewer is invited to create her own narrative, while in a narrative experience the reader is led by the author's narrative.

Significantly, Fisher excludes religion from his consideration of wonder, because in his view religion supplies a ready-made story so that the visual object becomes a sign instead of an aesthetic experience; in other words, there is nothing to figure out so no interpretation is involved.⁷⁵ He is, in many ways, right about this. For example, when I asked people at the festival what meaning Kāraikkāl Ammaiār had for them they nearly uniformly answered by telling me her story; it was very rare for people to respond to that question beyond the religious story. But I still think that the festival telling of the story is in essence different from

the narrative telling of the story. In the festival the story does frame the proceedings, determining the sequence of events, for example, but the story is halted for periods of what I would call awe and participation, or “a self-determined history of attention,” which is especially apparent in the anticipatory processions of Śiva Bhikṣāṭana. The viewers are asked to focus on the *utsava mūrti* (the festival image), experiencing the whole in the sense of being confronted by the sacred; this is awe. The viewer is also invited to create her own meaning in the context of a shared moment of awe; while this may not take the form of an interpretive narrative, it does relate to *bhakti*’s insistence on active participation and may take many forms, including prayer, eye contact with the image, and, in this particular festival, the gesture of throwing small mangos in the wake of the morning procession of Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana around the streets of the town.

The throwing of mangos does not derive from the canonical story; in fact, it is something of an inversion of it. In the biography, when Puṇitavatiyār receives the second mango from the Lord, it falls into her hands and then she delivers it to her husband. When he, surprised by the divine taste, asks her for another, she receives it from the Lord, and it then disappears as she attempts to hand it over to her skeptical husband. Thus, in the canonical story the descending mango is from the Lord to a human being. In the mango festival, the well-to-do people throw mangos down from their balconies in the wake of the chariot bearing an icon of the Lord to the less well-to-do people. The recipients are vastly male; the few females on the road seemed rather shy, and I actually regretted that I had not thrown a mango specifically to one of them. For me, a Hindu participant’s comment captured an aspect of the space between the text and the festival: She said that there is no “prestige” to catching the mangos on the road because “those people take anything from anywhere.” To which someone else replied, “Never mind (*paravāyillai*), it is part of the festival.” Alternatively, those who came down from the balconies into the street to offer worship (a tray of mangos and other offerings) to the image on the chariot when it paused declared the image “beautiful,” and received the *prasād* (returned blessed offerings) of a mango, sacred ash, and a laminated playing-card-sized image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in a white dress, with a quotation from her biography indicating the three wishes she made to Lord Śiva.⁷⁶ In this more formal dimension of ritual worship, the text reasserted itself.

On several levels, including the personally applicable (the wedding), the ludic (throwing the mangos), and the formal (offering worship and receiving *prasād*), these well-attended festival events created a public for the *bhakti* story of this particular saint’s devotion to the Lord, highlighting its local and, owing in large part to patrilocality (in contrast to the saint’s story), translocal resonances. On these various levels there were opportunities for attention, engagement, and participation in *bhakti* on both individual and collective levels: *Bhakti* created a public.⁷⁷

The public dimension is apparent not only through awe, performance, and community but also through its ability to attract contestation. For example, during the procession of the Lord in the streets at the “climactic” (as per the English-language temple-wall description) mango festival on Monday morning, a fire broke out at one of the houses that lined the initial stages of the route. Controversially, rumor

had it that a local Muslim politician had greeted the chariot bearing the Lord when it paused in front of this house, and that the fire could have been set by his supporters. When I expressed astonishment at this possibility, some suggested that the politician made a show of accepting Hinduism but did not really feel that way and so a destructive, distracting event occurred at this major Hindu festival in the town. My astonishment was in part a visceral response to the horror of the raging fire on the thatched rooftop (there was construction being performed on the house), for there are many modern reports since colonial times that tensions between communities are enacted through procession performances; current ethnographies trace these tensions in processions both within India and in overseas Indian communities.⁷⁸ At variance with the street opinions I overheard, news reports from 2008 to 2010 describe an organized drive to renovate the shrine to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ made by a Muslim politician, A. H. Nazeem (identified as a resident of Kāraikkāl and as leader of the opposition in the Pondicherry assembly), and a Jain businessman, Mahaveer Chand (identified as a resident of Kāraikkāl and the president of the temple renovation). A prestigious rite of (re)consecration (*mahākumbhābhīṣekam*) of the temple was held in April 2009, and a float festival in the renovated temple tank was held (after a forty-year interlude) in April 2010.⁷⁹

The next festival event, held in the evening, was to celebrate Puṇitavatiṃ's spontaneous feeding of the Śaiva mendicant, which plays an important role in the biography since it precipitates her separation from her husband. In terms of the biography, the festival dramatization was held at a later time than the textual representation, as the text clearly indicates by its mention of a hot repast of *sambar* (lentil vegetarian stew) and rice that the events took place at lunch time. Ritual timing is distinctive in its necessity of being keyed to human capacities: It was sweltering in the afternoons, so this event was held in the evening. Based on my experience with the wedding I arrived more than an hour early, too early, it turned out, for this well-attended but not over-subscribed event. My premature arrival gave me a chance to speak with some of the women who surrounded me, for the audience was mostly populated by women. As with my conversations with other women at this festival, these talks were brief and primarily centered around family, children, and the story of the saint. There seemed to be a reluctance on the part of many women to discuss their lives with a foreign scholar.⁸⁰ Puṇitavatiṃ stood in the same place she had at the conclusion of her wedding, except she was now alone because her husband, the Chettiar Paramatattan, had already gone to his shop for a day's work.

The police cordoned off a corridor from the formerly guarded gateway of the hall to the stage on which the icon rested. This corridor began to be filled with what I spontaneously thought of as "the men in white": men dressed in the traditional short-sleeved white cotton shirt with a crisp white dhoti; they were presumably government officials, although I heard one girl behind me say that one of the men was her school principal. It was certainly the male "who's who" of Kāraikkāl society. There were very few women in that illustrious crowd; those that were there acted with the subordination of a wife. There was an *ārati* to Puṇitavati and then

she was taken out to meet the mendicant. I could not see this part of the ritual at all from where I sat. Shortly the “beggar” – none other than Śiva Bhikṣāṭana – arrived inside the hall, and was placed where Puṇitavati had stood after her wedding. She was brought in afterwards, and placed far removed on the right side of the hall.

Brahmin priests gathered for *pūjā* to the deity. This again marked a significant departure from the biography because, as mentioned above, it nowhere describes the mendicant whom Puṇitavatiyār feeds as Śiva; he is represented in the text as simply a devotee of the Lord. If the mendicant had been human in this ritual performance, the events would have been a drama instead of a theologically inscribed potent moment of awe. As other Brahmin priests recited Sanskrit mantras and offered sacred water, flower petals, and so on to the deity, one priest took up a microphone and began to tell the story of Puṇitavatiyār offering the mango and rice to the mendicant. There was a temporary setback as someone accidentally pulled the electrical plug, so not only the microphone but an ubiquitous video camera were stalled. When power was shortly restored, the *ārati* continued, and it was announced that a *prasād* of curd and rice would be distributed.

I went by car to see Paramatattāṇ at his “shop” at the “Market Street Vināyākar Temple,” which was a local shrine, actually called Śrī Poyyātu Mūrtti Vināyākar Temple (The Sacred Form of Vināyākar without Falsehood Temple), in the central part of town. There he stood, before the pristine white marble-floored shrine that was surrounded by thirty-one painted depictions of the famous elephant God in poses of making music, dance, and meditation. I was the only one there, save a sullen teenage Brahmin. Then a cart with a Brahmin priest atop pulled up and claimed the icon. I had heard from a local woman that these priests hailed from Madurai, but I missed opportunities such as this one to confirm their provenance (someone else, less authoritatively, had suggested Pālāṇī). They took Paramatattāṇ in the cart and proceeded to the Somanātha Temple. There was a huge boat chariot there – perhaps the same kind of boat that Muslims use in their annual festival, reminiscent of nineteenth-century French vessels⁸¹ – beautifully illuminated with strings of colored lights. Devotees loaded Paramatattāṇ into the boat, in which a non-Brahmin man sat to stabilize the image. The poignant scene from the biography in which Puṇitavatiyār gives her husband the divine mango and then he challenges her to produce another was thus not dramatized in this festival.⁸² The boat, symbolically on its way to Pāṇṭiya Nāṭu, was processed around the streets.

After a dinner break, I went to the Śrī Siddhi Vināyaka Ālayam near the river, about a half-mile down Bhāratīyār Street from the main Śiva temples. Local people had advised me to be there around 10:00 p.m. There was a pop band playing “cine music” very loudly, and it seemed the whole town was there. I met up with some new local friends; when I expressed to them that I thought the band rather loud, they noted that if a loud band were not playing, everyone would simply go to sleep. My tired self believed them. After about an hour we headed to the nearby temple to witness the marriage of Paramatattāṇ to his new wife. This ritual was held outside of the temple. There were some sixty women gathered around, and very few men. The wedding ritual was enacted in what to me seemed a more elaborate manner than the wedding of Puṇitavatiyār and Paramatattāṇ on Sunday,

although the latter was much more crowded. This ritual took about an hour, and a man and a woman stood in for the bronze couple, who observed the ceremony from an elevated plank. After the wedding there was a street-dance performance of folk dancers and a drummer. When I asked my new local friend if they were “real” village performers or “pretend” ones she laughed and said, “Pretend! 90% of Tamilnadu is now city!” The “cine-music” group wrapped up.

Soon afterwards, at about 2:00 a.m., Punitavatiyār arrived at the temple (Śrī Siddhi Vināyaka Ālayam) in a giant pearl palanquin, accompanied by a Brahmin priest, an event sponsored by “the people of Kārai district.” The image was taken down from the palanquin and into the temple. My understanding was that what then transpired was not a public event; the printed schedule, following the biographical text, indicated that at this moment Punitavatiyār was worshiped by her former husband and his new wife and child, she shed her flesh, and she sang the poems she is said to have composed, the *Arputat Tiruvantāti* (“Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder”) and *Tiruviraṭṭai Maṇimālai* (“Sacred Double Garland of Gems”), but this was not performed. Instead, people dispersed. My new friends told me they were going to wash up before the final event, but I did not see them again.

My driver suggested we get some tea, which we did at a local shop on that same Bhāratīyār Street north past the main Śiva temples. We discussed the price of onions in India and the US to pass the time. Then we returned to the Somanātha Temple. There were many people sleeping on the floor of the temple. I wandered around the temple as though in an alternative universe. Then, suddenly, everyone awoke and started running out into Bhāratīyār Street. I also ran into the street and took up a place in the smallish crowd that lined the street on both sides. Soon, from around the street corner, the gods appeared. Śrī Gaṇeśa went by on a modest stand, followed by Murugaṇ and his two wives. The printed schedule had indicated that this would be a procession of the pañcamūrtis (five forms); one way of describing these five images is Gaṇeśa, Skanda (Murugaṇ), Pārvaṭī, Śiva, and Candikēśvara, although I could not tell beyond the images set in front of me which were included in this version, because, as the procession reached the temple, the image bearers sped up and the crowd lining the route began to run after them. Over my shoulder I caught a glimpse of Punitavatiyār, now represented as Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār as a skeletal image – decorated with white porcelain “bones” on a black background⁸³ – positioned upside down as though she were ascending Mount Kailāsa, and I joined everyone else in running into the temple. Large wooden doors attended by guards stopped the funneled crowd. My last image of the procession was the priest on the modest palanquin bearing Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār angrily swatting away devotees who were grabbing at the delicate veil of jasmine buds that surrounded the palanquin platform.

When the doors shut, my driver said that the festival had concluded. I was inclined to believe him, since the printed schedule had indicated as much. In addition, an earlier account of the festival indicated that this was its conclusion.⁸⁴ We began to leave the temple. However, I turned and saw over my shoulder that people were still crowded at the wooden temple doors that led to the part of the shrine

that housed Śiva. “If it is over, then why are they still there?” I asked. We turned around. Some time passed. I noticed that the crowd seemed composed of very local people, and in fact the procession was sponsored by a group (*caṅkam*) of shopkeeper-merchants of Kāraikkāl; these were the people who had been sleeping on the temple floor. None of the honored white-clad people were among the crowd, and the formerly ubiquitous video camera had been nowhere to be found for these early morning events. I felt it was strange that none of the “important” people were there for this momentous part of the story of the saint – nothing less than her spiritual liberation, which in fact made her a saint. However, this part of the story is not located in Kāraikkāl: It takes place at Mount Kailāsa, and then at Tiruvālānkāṭu, outside of Chennai, and I had witnessed the magnificent festival to the saint held there in February–March (month of *paṅguni*). The sponsorship of this part of the program had, ironically, been left to the very local people, relinquished to them by the big merchants with presumably far-flung business contacts and importance beyond the confines of the small town of Kāraikkāl. Rather than a ceremony of public honor, this concluding ritual was a venue for *bhakti*’s determined devotional public.

The crowd began to push mightily. I was caught up in it and became fearful. I extricated myself once and then, in an act of what I considered at the time to be sheer courage, I re-entered the fray, determined to see what was on the other side of the wooden doors. Just when I thought I could not bear it any longer the funnel moved forward, and I was pushed past a guard through a crack in the doors. On the other side . . . dawn, peace, and a self-regulated single file line. It was a beautiful contrast. I joined the line and looked up at the dawn, and then at the stillness of the surrounding shrines. We silently filed around the back of the Śiva temple and then went inside, coming at the saint from behind; she faced away from Śiva and towards the Lord’s first devotee, his bull Nandi, who in temples is always to be found just outside of the sanctum, gazing within. As I stood before the saint, who was now changed into a sari and ornamented with flowers, I received a piece of the jasmine veil, *vibhuti* (sacred ash), and *kumkum* (red powder) from the priest. I stepped back through the wooden doors and the temple forecourt, and onto Bhāratīyār Street. It was light now, and I could see workers already dismantling the makeshift shops. I was simply not ready for the experience to be dismantled, so I quickly made for my hotel, where I sat quietly and savored the event.

What I and others had experienced is the “all-at-once” visual impact of the festival through its processions and rituals devoted to saint and God. This “all-at-once” impact, while resonating with the *darśan* concept, also points to its limitation, as while the visual provides a focusing lens it is greatly enhanced by the collective experiences that surround it. That people choose to participate in the festival is an act of a “self-determined history of attention,” within the frame of the biography and the priorities of the festival organizers, with the latter specifically emphasizing the significance of place in their choices. Ritual has a special contribution to make to this aspect of theory as well, because it is a focusing device *par excellence*. The festival rituals are both created by and create a public that shares an experience of moments of the story. This public aspect of the festival also transforms

the biography, because in the latter the saint is portrayed as quite alone in her unmediated relationship with Śiva, for the people who surround her are not able to understand it. The festival, in contrast, enables participants to experience the *bhakti* that the saint herself experienced. When ritual tells the story, it innovatively transforms the story by its emphasis on visceral experience through awe, participation, and shared encounter, made possible by the frisson of simultaneity.

Concluding thoughts

The poet-saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ is at the center of this study. As much as I admire illuminating stories that revolve around a “nobody” – Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) comes to mind, controversial though that novel may be in some quarters – my study takes a “somebody” as its focal point. Tamils have revered Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ for over 1,000 years. She is celebrated as the first poet within Śiva-*bhakti* tradition; sixty-two other saints, about a dozen of them authors, followed her. Her devotional poetic works were preserved and then canonized. Her life story was imaginatively represented in a biography that also became canonized. She became embodied in bronze statues that reside and are ritually celebrated in numerous temples in Tamilnadu; in fact, devotees always point out that among the set of bronze images of the sixty-three saints, she alone is represented as sitting before the Lord, for all the other saints stand. In a world informed by the code of royalty, sitting in the presence of an exalted one is a privilege, and it was bestowed only upon her. While Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ is admired for pioneering new literary forms, she is most celebrated for her religious achievement. She is clearly a distinctive and important person and personage. My study is grounded in her singular importance, while acknowledging issues of historical precision concerning her actual existence.

However, my main focus is to analyze materials to determine ways that she can be, and is, understood by herself and others; what clues we have over time towards defining who she was, what her interests were, and how her perspective was understood to be significant. In a real sense, that is all we are left with, the attempts then and now to make sense of what she experienced and wrote. And the fact that she left us poetry is highly significant: At least she was able to speak for herself, even if, owing in part to the difficulty of her poetry, her voice became over time overshadowed by the dominance of her biographer’s representations of her nature and significance. Still, his interest in her played a role in preserving her poetry, and the fact that her work is extant today provides us a glimpse of her through her own utterances, which is significant in terms of the world record of women’s voices in history.

In her poetry, she made it clear that she was an embodied human being, and that she directed her remarks to other human beings. Of course her utterances were in

a specific language (Tamil) at a specific time (ca. 550 CE); but her poetry itself traces a path that thoughtfully reflects on human life more generally, and in order to do justice to her vision we must acknowledge that idea. This was part of my motivation in bringing the study of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār to an English-speaking readership.

In the opening chapter I discussed issues around the problem of our access to understanding the works of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. The problem of access is not limited to present-day English speakers reading this book; it exists for everyone who is not Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār but seeks to understand her. I would even extend the problem to Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār herself, or indeed any author who composes an autobiographical text, since the author needs to think about herself and choose the best way to represent herself in her work, in this most relentlessly self-reflexive of genres.

Interpretation is a mode of human understanding and thus it is relational. Current theories of interpretation in the field of religious studies emphasize possibilities for mutual understanding across traditions, cultures, histories, and bodies. This does not mean that cultural differences do not matter. Rather, it means that there must be people willing to reach across those cultural differences. Interpretation is an important way to make a connection, because one invests oneself in understanding what another person is saying or doing: One attempts to communicate with another. Thus, one model of how to reach across is to emphasize language as communication. In the case of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's works, that means we understand that an axiomatic premise of hers is the existence of God. In her poetry, the fact of God demands a specific human subjectivity: A devotional subjectivity. Her poetry revolves around these two premises, as she describes both God and her efforts to relate to him through body, heart/mind, and speech.

The main advantage of what I will call the communication model of interpretation is that it emphasizes the study of religion as study within the humanities. What we are dealing with is the desire on the part of an author to communicate something she feels is important to other human beings. Unless context suggests otherwise, we have to believe that people mean what they say. That speaker is creating a discourse whose premises and argumentation we can understand through interpretation. Religious discourse is within the realm of normative human discourse, and as such it is accessible to interpretation. This model refuses to appeal to a pre-reflective instance of experience, as many earlier models of defining religion tended to do.

Taking this communication model as an interpretive premise, we can then nuance the perspective further. For example, there are different types of discourse. Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār promotes the worship of the god Śiva. A scholarly study of her works, such as this book, does not have to, although it can. Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's poetry presents Śiva as an incomparable, *sui generis* being; she is concerned both to assert and to describe his presence. In contrast, I am concerned with interpreting the ways in which the poet represents herself and her god in her poetic discourse. I bring contextual information into the discussion in order to see the selections and priorities she has made in her interpretation of herself and Śiva.

Arguably, the communication model of interpretation can be nuanced by another model of interpretation current in religious studies, which I call the experience model, although, it should be noted, recent discussions of the communication model try to remove any consideration of experience from the discussion on the premise that it has been overused, and imprecisely used, in the past. The experience model, which is being developed specifically as a way to interpret mystical texts, emphasizes that such utterances carry the experience that gave rise to the words. Thus, through reading or hearing the words we can have a similar experience. Like the communication model, the experience model appeals to our shared humanity as creating possibilities for mutual understanding. However, the experience model insists that the experience originates in a place, perhaps the right side of the brain, that is not filtered by the numerous distinctions we make to locate ourselves in the world, for which we use the left side of the brain. Indeed, mysticism is often described as a union that contrasts with the ordinary world that we construct as defined by differentiations.

I agree that experience is a necessary part of the analysis. In fact, communication is an experience; in light of this, I would want to characterize experience in a way that is not necessarily religiously defined, such as mysticism, and in a way that brings experience, communication, and language together rather than seeing them as opposed. My formulation along these lines is that communication is an everyday experience of non-duality. The speaker and the interpreter are, in instances of communication, connected in an experience of understanding shared between the two. It does not mean that the speaker and the interpreter collapse into one; it does not mean that they remain separate. It means there is a shared moment of “getting it” across distinctions of embodiment and emotional and mental habit.

This experience of non-duality informed my translation of selected verses from the poems of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in [Chapter 2](#). The poet and the translator are not one, and they are not two. They are not one because the poems are rendered in English, a language other than the Tamil of their original composition. They are not two because I am translating what Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār herself has written, respecting her choices of subject matter, words, and images.

In each of the subsequent chapters I discussed the relationship of the interpreter to the interpreted as contributing towards a discourse on the identity and significance of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. [Chapter 3](#) interprets Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s representation of herself and Lord Śiva in her poetry. Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār interpreted herself, fashioning her being and perspective as that of a devotional subject. As previously noted, she is considered to be the first devotional subject in Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition. She imagined herself to be in constant contemplation of the Lord Śiva through her praise, description, and questioning of him. The majority of her corpus creates a discourse of her as a human devotional subject and, as such, she appeals to other human beings to take on a devotional subjectivity to Śiva.

This dominant image of her as a human devotee or “servant” to the Lord is complicated by her reference to “joining” the “*pēy*” or ghouls that reside in the cremation ground where the Lord dances. She could be saying that she became a ghoul along the lines of the female ghoul whose body she described in one of

her verses; Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's own body is portrayed in that manner in both her biographer Cēkkiḷār's narrative and in iconographic tradition. This traditional link between the poet's description of the female ghoul and the poet's own body also has bearing on understanding the poet to have been female. As I discussed in [Chapter 1](#), there is nothing in Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's poetry to establish unambiguously that she is a woman: The "I" and the "we" in those among her poems that specify a subject do not reveal gender. The poet's ambiguity on this point (the poet must have gender, but it is not specified in the poet's works) permits a reading in which the poet is conflated with the female ghoul she describes in her decades on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, which in turn can seem to provide "evidence" that the poet was female.

However, taking seriously the fact that the poet did not call attention to gender, I noted a disjuncture here because the way she describes the actions of that female ghoul contradict the devotional subjectivity she traces in the majority of her poetry. Specifically, the female ghoul seems to be at the mercy of her instincts, in contrast to the thoughtful, self-conscious, and loving behavior Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār defines at the center of her devotional subjectivity. This disjuncture encouraged me to develop alternative interpretations of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's association with the ghouls, including taking an historical view to understand that she identifies herself as a poet by consciously linking herself to past poetic tradition in her use of such imagery, a philosophical view that her use of such images of the cremation ground trace the becoming of a devotional self and a speaking subject, and a political view in the sense that the Pallava dynasty was representing its presence and power in the region in part with reference to Tiruvālaṅkāṭu.

A devotional subjectivity creates an image not only of the devotee, but also of God, in the sense that it is this subjectivity that interprets God and his significance. This was the poet's priority. In contrast to the lack of detail concerning her human body, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār detailed the appearance of the Lord's body, largely drawing on Sanskrit mythological motifs. As interpreted through a devotional subjectivity, the transcendence and heroism of God in Sanskrit mythology is brought within accessible proximity to the devotee. For example, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār notices and singles out the Lord's foot from several myths, and she uses this image to frame her allusions to those stories. The Lord's foot is the devotee's aspiration – to reach simply the lowest part of the Lord's body – and so the poet interprets the Sanskritic transcendence as meaningful within the possibilities of the human devotional subject.

That the Lord's transcendence is within reach does not mean that everything is on the devotee's scale. Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār praises the Lord's cosmic powers, usually with reference to his rule over the natural world. Moreover, she poses challenging questions about his true nature, including a significant cluster of questions about his forms. Her numerous questions represent the path of devotion as a challenging one. This challenge is presented most strikingly when she celebrates the "other side" of God, specifically his dance in the domain of death. Śiva's socially constituted antisocial behavior, such as appearing as a nude ascetic adorned with cobras at a wedding, is recounted in many Sanskrit myths. However, Kāraikkāl

Ammaiār is the *bhakti* poet who contextualizes such images in a recognition of the human fear of and aversion to such imagery, and she points to the depth of devotion that accompanies an embrace of such imagery in spite of ordinary human limitations. Specifically, she chooses the image of the cremation ground, which has particularly uncomfortable resonances for humankind. She clearly represents herself as willingly residing in this place that challenges us at our own limit of mortality. In some instances, she seems to encourage humankind to take the fearful as beautiful; in other instances, she seems to suggest that we have to adapt to the horror of seemingly natural processes that are actually defined by God. Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, as distinct from the other canonical *bhakti* poets, celebrated this challenge throughout her poetic works in diverse ways.

Notably, her emphasis on keeping God in mind insisted on his presence in the here-and-now; “remembering” has a sense of the now in a way that cannot be achieved when speaking of a human being who has passed away. This is a major difference in the register of “memory” between poet and biographer, and it must be acknowledged. Keeping Śiva in mind is distinct from remembering the past life of a saint, and so later tradition’s attempt to interpret the life of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār resulted in the use of a distinctive genre, biography, to represent her.

Chapter 4 explored her biographer’s interpretation of her. Here, we saw that the gendered body comes to the fore in his representation of her spirituality. Endowed with every social, physical, and emotional grace, Puṇitavati was on the path to success in the world, in both worldly and spiritual terms. Yet, ultimately, in a plot that is found across religions, especially in stories of women, her spiritual life came into conflict with her worldly life. Cēkkiḷār, her biographer, represented her achievement, as well as that of the other sixty-two saints, as dedicated devotion to, and the direct experience of, Lord Śiva. Intriguingly, and perhaps expectedly to a feminist interpreter, her male biographer required that she change her body from that of a socially commodified beauty to a socially defined “other.”

The otherness of her body signified the otherness of her consciousness. According to her biographer, she composed her poetry in a state of mystical awareness. He describes her as “united with the divine wisdom that had arisen within her” and “brimming with profound insight.” Thus, she was in a state of mind that was beyond ordinary consciousness. Her biographer’s suggestion is that since she composed her poetry in that extraordinary state, her poetry can be a vehicle for that state, and thus anyone reading her poetry can access and experience extraordinary consciousness; this relates to the experience model of interpretation. Her biographer points us towards her words by reproducing the first words of each of her poems in his text. His narrative creates an order for her writings, from her first stanza of the “Wonder” to her vision of Śiva at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu; as I have demonstrated, his narrative takes cues in her poems to create this order. He creates a memorable story around the sayings of the saint in a way that can readily be accessed by memory in the future, and his interpretation definitively represents the saint in the memory of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti*. However, though he seeks to convey the essence of her vision to others, he represents it through his eyes in a way that

is only complexly related to her poetry, which raises a number of questions today that he could not have anticipated then.

In particular, there are identifiable patterns of patriarchy in his narrative. Not surprisingly, Cēkkiḷār takes patriarchal points of reference as lodestars – her beauty, marriage, relationship to father, relationship to husband, and rejection of fleshly body. In a real sense, he “domesticated” her identity and story. In part, her biographer’s interest was to make Śiva a reassuring father figure (a motif across his stories of the other saints); thus, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār’s image of him as a dancer at the cremation ground did not fit in with his plan, and he displaced it with a dominant story about her as a female mystic who called God “father” and who in turn was called “mother” by God. But, in so doing, he revealed the fiction of femaleness – *māyā* (illusion) not in the sense of a synonym for female but in the sense of revealing the contours of a socially constituted feminine life and the obstacles specific to it. Cēkkiḷār was, in a sense, backed into this disclosure by the contours of his own discourse, which included and described the challenges of a universality of people, including Tamils urban and rural, Brahman and “untouchable,” male and female, and extrovert and introvert. He simply had to show the distinctions among various categories, and in so doing he revealed the discourses that created those distinctions. Since Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār’s story is the only one about a woman told in more than three verses, it is her story that both creates and reveals a patriarchal interpretation of *bhakti*.

Ethnography, in this case an engagement with performance, brings this study, as well as the saint’s poems and her biographer’s narrative, into the present day. Festivals are where the memory of the saint, which is based on interpretive gestures, is enacted. And festivals themselves are interpretive: They select certain elements for priority and de-emphasize the rest. The mode of festivals is distinctive in that they cultivate an all-at-once experience of visual materials, ritual action, and story narrative. This simultaneity of experience is definitional to a festival, and points to some of the limitations in using the *darśan* (seeing and being seen by God) concept exclusively to define the Hindu experience of the presence of God. Through analysis of the festival, we come to understand how spectacular moments are represented through performance: A saint’s spiritual liberation, the highest goal in the religious tradition; a marriage, the most accessible and resonant event for the larger populace; and the appearance of a “beggar” whose divine essence transforms a marginal category of person into one revered.

Complexly, simultaneous to prioritizing the story, ritual performance changes the story. It provides moments of visual awe, such that participants – a public – are able to emerge from the festival with a pronounced sense of a “self-determined history of attention,” to borrow Phillip Fisher’s phrase. Participants give emphasis to elements of the biography to which the biographer did not, and they create new moments of participation that were not, and could not have been, part of the printed page. In the simultaneity of experience oriented around but not limited to the visual *darśan* concept, participants construct a meaningful place for themselves, a public, in the proceedings. Ethnography reveals both the visual and the gestural elements that vivify festival celebrations.

What we are left with is a sense of the evolving tradition of the self-fashioning of the classical female saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ and its influence and transmutation under the interpretive gaze of others. This process is ongoing, through modes of interpretation that take place in distinctive languages and gestures, including biography, festival performance, and academic scholarship.

Appendix 1

The poems of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in translation

In preparing this translation I primarily used three sources listed in the Bibliography under Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, works of (volumes from Tarumai Ātīṇam and Tamil Nilaiyam from 1995, and a volume from Institut Français d’Indologie from 1982), and the other, older sources under her name on a consulting basis. These editions have modern commentary on the poems and/or historical information and discussion. To my knowledge there are no medieval commentaries on her works, which is the case with most, but not all, of the texts included in the Śaiva devotional canon (*Tirumurai*). I found overall the poems of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār to be difficult to translate, especially in comparison to later works within Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition, such as the hymns of the three most famous male saints (Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar) and Cēkkiḷār’s *Periya Purāṇam*, selections from both of which I had previously translated. As I discuss in [Chapter 1](#), Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār was a pioneer in new literary forms, for which she is celebrated and honored. The later poets seem to have drawn on her innovations and perfected them.

I began my translation in spring 2003 under a Fulbright Senior Research grant, and I am deeply indebted and grateful to Professor A. A. Manavalan, Emeritus Professor of Tamil Language and Literature at the University of Madras, who helped me with the translation at that time and on a follow-up trip to India to finalize my translation in 2009. Professor Manavalan is widely known and appreciated for his extensive linguistic, historical, and comparative knowledge of classical Tamil literature. He helped me with complex issues of translation such as navigating unclear syntax, locating diction and meaning within the poetry’s historical context, and finding the elusive line between detail and generality to make the Tamil poetry accessible to an English-speaking audience. His patient, dignified presence must be seen behind whatever I have right in this translation. I also wish to thank the International Institute of Tamil Studies in Taramani, Chennai, for hosting my affiliation in that semester, and especially Dr. Annie Thomas, who shared her expert knowledge of classical Tamil poetics with me.

I have also greatly benefited from issues raised and models set by translators of Tamil poetry such as A. K. Ramanujan, Norman Cutler, Indira Peterson, David Shulman, Vidya Dehejia, and Martha Selby; within this group, Cutler and Dehejia have translated a few of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s hymns, which were helpful to me

on a comparative basis. S. Sasivalli's translation of a few of the saint's poems, with critical discussion, was also helpful. I did not obtain a printed copy of the eminent translator T. N. Ramachandran's translation of all of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār's hymns until I had completed my preliminary translation (his translation is now on the web and thus widely available); his insights proved valuable as I finalized my translation. Kārāvelāne's translations into French were helpful along the way, although an English translation of his French translation that did not have any reference to the Tamil by Peter de Bruijn, the founder of Dhyani Asian Arts, was not at all helpful to me (*Kāraikkālammaiyār*. In two parts, *Part 1: An iconographical and textual study* and *Part 2: Poems for Siva*. Netherlands: Dhyani Publishers, 2007).

Readers will notice some changes between the rendering of selected poems represented in Chapter 2 and their rendering here. This is based on my attempt to make the poems in Chapter 2 particularly accessible to an English-speaking audience. In that chapter, I believed I was more on the Target Language side of the elusive line; in this Appendix, I believe I am more on the Source Language side of that line.

The *Arputat Tiruvantāti* ("Wonder") and the *Tiru Iraṭṭai Maṇimālai* ("Garland") are both in the *antāti* meter, meaning that each verse begins with the word that concluded the previous verse; even the very first verse of each of the two compositions begins with the final word of the very last verse, so the entire poem is linked. This is very hard to render in English, given the differences in syntax and given that in Tamil the same word can have distinctive meanings, which requires the use of different words in English. However, here is an example of how this might look using two verses of the *Arputat Tiruvantāti* ("Wonder"):

2.

Even if our lord
 who is adorned with bones
 and dances on the flames
 would not cure our afflictions,
 even if he would not pity us,
 even if he would not tell us the right way,
 the love in my heart will never cease for him.

3.

For him alone is our love;
 him we will serve for seven births;
 besides the lord
 who is adorned with the crescent moon
 in his thick matted locks
 we will never become servants of any other.

However, especially in the case of v. 2, I prefer to translate it in the manner I have below, since the Tamil in the verse builds on parallel "even if" phrases,

unbroken by the qualifying description of the Lord, which I have had to insert here in order to place “for him” at the conclusion of the verse.

The two hymns also have linkages within them. The *Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut tiruppatikam* (“Decade-1”) uses a refrain in most of its verses, “dancing, our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu,” that serves as a link between the verses. In the *Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut tiruppatikam* (“Decade-2”), the phrase “the beautiful lord dances” appears several times as a refrain. Generally in these two decades, the link is that the dancing Lord is described in the second half of each verse. As I briefly discuss in Chapter 1, this is an older, Caṅkam-era form of the *antāti* meter.

Arputat Tiruvantāti, Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder

The canon of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* works, the *Tirumurai* (“Sacred Collection”) presents the poet’s works in the following order: “Decade-1,” “Decade-2,” “Garland,” and “Wonder.” Cēkkiḷār describes their composition in the reverse order (but with “Decade-1” before “Decade-2”) as part of his interpretation of the saint’s spiritual trajectory. I follow Cēkkiḷār’s order but for my own reasons: To give pride of place to her longest work, the “Wonder,” to highlight its continuities with the “Garland,” and to register the “Decades” distinction from them. The title of the poem is from Cēkkiḷār; “wonder” (*arputam*) is not a term used by the poet. Translator Kārāvelāne understands “wonder” to be “the miraculous one,” an epithet of Śiva; I think it more supportable both in terms of linguistic structure and meaning to render the term as “wonder.” Similarly, I rendered the phrase “of” instead of “on,” accepting the biographer’s suggestion that the title suggests the state of mind of the author rather than names the subject of a treatise. Commentator Tiru. Ci. Aruṇai Vaṭivēlu Mutaliyār (hereafter CAVM) renders this state of mind as *ṇaṇam* (“highest spiritual wisdom,” Skt. *ṇāṇa*), also in keeping with Cēkkiḷār’s perspective.

1.
After I was born and learned to speak,
with overflowing love I reached
your sacred red feet;
oh, lord of the gods
whose neck shimmers black,
when will you end my afflictions?

Notes: Commentator CAVM interprets this passage to suggest that she is divine from birth, but my understanding is that the poem itself suggests that the speaker’s love for God grew over time. 1. 2: “I reached”, *cērentēṇ*. 1. 3: “your”, *nin*, familiar form of second person possessive. 1. 5: “neck shimmers black”, an allusion to Śiva’s swallowing of the poison initially created when the gods (*devas*) and demons (*asuras*) churned the ocean of milk in primordial times to produce the elixir of immortality; one of the Lord’s Eight Heroic Deeds in mythology. 1. 6:

“you” is implied since she appeals to the Lord directly (*perumāṇē*); “afflictions,” *iṭar*.

2.

Even if he would not cure our afflictions
 even if he would not pity us
 even if he would not tell us the right way,
 the love in my heart
 for our lord
 adorned with bones
 and dancing on the flames
 will never cease.

Notes: l. 2: “even if he would not pity us,” *emakk(u) iraṅkār ēṇum*. l. 4: “love,” *aṇpu*; “my heart,” *eṇ neṇcu*. l. 7: “dancing on the flames” (*eriyāṭum*) implies that he is dancing at the burning ground.

3.

Our love is for him alone
 whom we will serve for seven births;
 besides the lord
 who is adorned with the crescent moon
 in his thick matted locks
 we will never become servants of any other.

Notes: ll. 2 and 6: “serve”/“servants,” *āl*. l. 6: “we will never become,” *ākāppōm*.

4.

If we, his servants,
 knowledgeably complain of our sorrows,
 what is the reason that
 the lord
 with the lustrous red body
 and the contrasting throat
 who takes us as his servants
 would neither hear nor listen to us?

Notes: l. 1: “we, his servants,” *ālāṇōm*; “his” is implied. l. 2: “sorrows,” *allal*. l. 6: “contrasting throat,” *miṭaru maṇṇōṇrām*, lit. “the other one,” referring to the color black in contrast to his red body. Śiva is “the red one” (*civan*), and his throat is darkened because of his swallowing the poison in primordial times (see also vv. 6 and 55), one of the major mythological stories about Śiva. The verse plays on contrasts, in terms of the Lord’s bodily colors and in terms of his making them his servants yet possibly disregarding them, implying an answer to its own question –

that his bodily contrast could be the reason for his not being receptive to the *bhaktas*.

5.

The lord alone
causes all beings here
to be born, flourish, and pass away;
if we piteously cry “our father”
when beset with burning afflictions,
he will eliminate them.

Notes: The structure of the Tamil is a conditional clause, “if we are beset, then we plead”; the subject of the clause is those who are beset, *eṅkaṇmēl*, lit., “on us.”
l. 4: “our father,” *entāy*.

6.

Call him
lord of the heavens
king of the gods
lord of his place
lord of the highest knowledge
lord with the iridescent neck
that turned black from poison in times of yore;

I call him lord of my heart.

Notes: l. 4: “lord of his place,” *tāṇattāṇ*, suggesting Mount Kailāsa, his abode in the Himālayas according to mythology.

7.

I perform tapas
my heart is true
I have decided to end my cycle of rebirth;
I have become a servant
of the lord with the third eye
who is covered in white ash
and cloaked with the skin of the elephant.

Notes: l. 1: “tapas” (*tavam*), austerities. l. 3: entire line, *yāṇē piṛappu aṟuppāṇ eṇṇiṇēṇ*, lit. “I decided to cut my birth/s.” l. 5: “lord,” *ammāṇ*; today this term is used by Brahmins to signify mother’s brother (maternal uncle), but in medieval times it meant “father” or “God as father.” l. 7: “skin of the elephant,” a reference to the Lord’s flaying of the elephant-demon Gajāśura, one of the Lord’s Eight Heroic Deeds in mythology.

8.

When I achieved the precious status
of servant to the lord of servants long ago,
was that not the way of grace from
the lord
 who appears as a golden mountain
 bearing the pure waves of the Gaṅga
 and the flames of the Gaṅga-like fire.

Notes: l. 1: “precious,” *ariyaṇ*, in the sense of “difficult to achieve” as well as “valuable.” l. 4: “grace,” *arul*. l. 7: “Gaṅga-like fire,” *aṇal kaṅkai*; the movement of waves and fire are compared; this phrase can also be understood as *aṇalku aṅkai*, holding “fire in his palm.” The story of Śiva dispersing the heavenly river Gaṅga through his matted locks so she will not destroy the earth as she descends is a major mythological motif.

9.

By grace the lord protects the entire world
by grace he stops the cycle of rebirth
by grace I clearly know eternal truth;
grace is everything to me.

10.

Always have I kept
God, my sweet lord,
as a sweet treasure in my heart;
I have taken him as my savior
and I experience bliss;
is anything an obstacle for me?

Notes: l. 4: “savior,” *pirāṇāka*. l. 6: “bliss,” *iṇpu*. l. 7: “obstacle,” *ariyatu*, in the sense of “difficult.”

11.

I aspired to only one thing.
I settled on that one thing and left the rest.
I kept inside my heart only that one thing:
 the lord who bears the Gaṅga
 the lord whose locks are adorned with the sun and the moon
 the lord whose palm holds the flaming fire;
and I have become a servant to him.

12.

That is the way the lord
makes us become his servants;
if we understand that now
that is the greatness
of the lord
 who wears a garland of summer flowers
 and has a unique eye on his shining forehead.

Notes: The referent of “that” is unclear, though it could refer to the previous verse, with the “I” as servant now understood to be made by the lord, along with other devotees. l. 2: “makes us become his servants,” *āl koḷḷum ārum*; “his” is implied by “lord,” *pirāṇ*; “us” is implied by the verb, “if we understand,” *aṟintōmāṇāl*. l. 4: “greatness,” *takavu*, lit. “suitable, fit.” l. 6: “who wears a garland of summer flowers,” *paṇikku aṇaṅku kaṇṇiyār*, “garland [of flowers] that wilt in the cool [winter],” following commentator CAVM. l. 7: “Has a unique eye,” *taṇik kaṇ aṅku vaittār*; could also be read and translated as *taṇikku aṇaṅku vaittār*, “keeps the peerless goddess [Gaṅga]”; the verse’s unambiguous reference to “on the forehead” (*nutaliṇ*) makes me prefer the former translation.

13.

If he is equitable
it is not proper to allow
the creeping cobra to move
across his garlanded chest,
for should it strike
the daughter of the mountain one day
it would be a terrible misfortune.

Notes: Other verses describe the “daughter of the mountain,” Pārvatī, the wife of Śiva, as being half of the Lord’s body (vv. 39, 41, 47, 50, 51, 59, 71); thus, the cobra could strike her. l. 6: “Terrible misfortune,” *pāvam*. The term often connotes the result of bad actions (karma). More controversially, this term appears in v. 76.

14.

The lord himself
will save my dear heart
and become a great refuge;
I always think of him,
 the one who adorns his chest
 with the sinuous snake that spits flames of venom
 as his unique ornament.

Notes: There is no first person singular verbal form used in this verse: Whose heart, and who is doing the thinking, are left unspecified. I have rendered it as

“my”/“I” because of the reference to the heart. I have added “always.” l. 2: “will save,” *uyak koḷvāṇ*.

15.

Even if the celestials
contemplate and adorn his feet
with abundant flower garlands,
they will not receive his blessings:
How will the lord who has glossy red matted locks
treat I who praise him as lord of the Vedas?

Notes: The issue here is one of relative proximity; if those within his milieu cannot be certain of his blessings, how can a human devotee? l. 4: “they will not receive his blessings,” *aṭiporunta māṭṭār*, lit. “they will not reach his feet.” While this phrase does uncontroversially translate to “receive blessings,” it is also of note I am at a disadvantage since the poet gracefully uses two different terms for feet in her verse (*pātam* and *aṭi*). As I discuss in [Chapter 3](#), the term *aṭi* can be used as a reference to devotees (but *pātam* never is); see also vv. 44 and 69.

16.

Oh, my heart
we have received the grace of the lord
and now we are saved;
we have no more sorrows,
for we have swum across
the roaring ocean of innumerable births
accumulated from a sea of karma.

Notes: l. 2: “grace,” *aruḷ*. l. 7: “karma,” *viṇai*.

17.

For those who behold,
he is the lord who can be seen;
for those who offer worship,
he is the lord who can be seen;
for those who see by love,
sacred light will appear in their minds;
Hara is the origin of this ancient universe.

Notes: Using parallel constructions like those in my English rendering, the verse delineates both external and internal modes of worship, and the distinctive registers of “seeing” (*darśan*) the Lord. l. 6: “sacred light,” *cōti* (Skt. *jyōthi*); “in their minds,” *cintaiyuḷ*. l. 7: “Hara,” *araṇ*, a name of Śiva.

18.

How shall I call my lord?
He crushed Tāṇavaṇ
with a single toe, destroying his pride:
Shall I call him Hara? The four-faced one? Hari?
I cannot understand the significance
of these distinctive forms.

Notes: 1. 2: “Tāṇavaṇ,” Rāvaṇa; an allusion to the major mythological story in which Rāvaṇa, the demon-king of Laṅka, became so powerful and proud that he thought to bring Śiva’s Mount Kailāsa in the Himalayas to his own southern kingdom. After the Lord crushed him, he repented and became a devotee. 1. 4: “Hara,” *araṇ*, is a name for Śiva; the “four-faced One,” *nāṇmukaṇ*, is a name for Brahma; “Hari,” *ariya*, is a name for Viṣṇu. 1l. 5–6: the phrase in the poem is *paṇṇu uṇar mātṭēṇ*; *paṇṇu* is “nature, quality, essence”; it can refer to his essence, or the significance of each of his distinctive forms. The term is also used in vv. 58 and 59; on this theme see also vv. 28 and 61.

19.

In times of yore
the lord could not be measured
by Māl and the four-faced one;
how could it be easy for us today to understand
the lord of the three-fold seven worlds
who is always adorned by the crescent moon?

Notes: The verse could be read as a statement that it is possible for us to understand the Lord or as questioning our ability to do so. If read in light of the previous verse, the question is more apt since it continues the theme of not being able to understand the significance of his form. 1. 3: Māl is a name for Viṣṇu and “the four-faced one” is Brahma. The allusion is to a major mythological story in which Śiva transforms himself into a great fiery column (a *liṅga*) and challenges Viṣṇu and Brahma to find its origin and height, respectively. They are humbled when they cannot do so, and realize Śiva’s superiority. 1. 4: “easy for us,” *namakku eḷitē*. 1. 5: “three-fold seven worlds,” *mū eḷ ulakaṇkaḷ; ulakaṇkaḷ* (worlds) can be thought of as an equivalent for the Sanskrit *loka*, which are variously defined in the mythology, but often involve heavens, earth, and underworld, each of which contains seven types of people or realms. 1. 6: “crescent moon,” *mūva mati*, “moon that does not wane.” However, the term *matiyaṇai* (here rendered, “he who is adorned by the crescent moon”) can also be translated as “he who cannot be estimated by the mind.”

20.

He is the known
he is the knower
he is the knower and the knowledge
he is the meaning of truth that can be known
he is the essence of rays of light, earth, and the heavens.

Notes: l. 5: “heavens,” *ākāyam*, which denotes the most subtle element and is often translated as “ether”; the list suggests representative elements of light (sun, moon), earth (earth, water, fire, air), and space (Skt. *ākāśa*).

21.

He is the lord who becomes
the two lights, fire, and the heavens;
he is the lord who becomes
earth, water, and wind;
he is the lord who becomes
the overlord, the eight forms, and the highest wisdom.

Notes: l. 2: “two lights,” sun and moon are implied; “heavens,” *ākācam*; this form of the term *ākāyam* (see note to previous poem) is today a colloquial spoken form. l. 6: “overlord,” *iyamānan*; “the eight forms,” a reference to Śiva as Aṣṭamūrti, as listed in the poem (sun and moon, earth, water, wind, fire, ether, and the “overlord” or sacrificer); “highest wisdom,” *nānam* (Skt. *nāna*).

22.

You *bhaktas* should understand
that the moon is saved.
The lord whose throat is dark
as water at night
knows the mind of the glossy cobra,
and shelters the moon on his head.

Notes: This poem refers to the myth of Rāhu, a lunar deity who has negative associations. He is said to cause eclipses by swallowing the sun and the moon, and he is often depicted with a human head and a snake body. l. 1: “you *bhaktas* should understand,” *kanmin*, where *min* is a second person vocative, and “*bhaktas*” is implied. l. 3: “the lord,” *pirāṇīr*, is actually a vocative (“oh, lord”), as is another word in the poem, *kaṇṭattīr* (“oh, lord whose throat”), but I have chosen to prioritize only one vocative, to the *bhaktas*, in my translation. The verse suggests that just as the Lord has saved the moon, so will he save the *bhaktas*.

23.

Even if the lord who bears
the crescent moon, the river, fire, and the cobra
does not take pity on us,
our hearts in which our father resides
know that we are servants
to our dark-throated father.

Notes: 1. 4: “our hearts in which our father resides,” *entaiyā uḷlam itu*. 1. 5: “know,” *enrenru irukkumē*, lit. “thinking, thinking that.” “we are servants,” *āṭpaṭṭēm*, lit., “we became servants.”

24.

That which appears
again and again in my thoughts,
is it not
a sacred form of the lord
a refuge for me
a form as bright as lightning?

Notes: 1. 2: “my thoughts,” *eṇ cintāṇai*. 1. 4: “a sacred form of the lord,” *īcaṇ tiruvuvam*. 1. 5: “a refuge for me,” *enṇaṇak(ku) or cēmam*.

25.

Without explanation,
our lord wanders everywhere
begging for sundry offerings,
then dances in the cremation ground
in the darkest of night;

we ponder why he does this,
but what can we say now?
Should we see him one day
we shall ask him.

Notes: 1. 2: “our lord,” *em perumāṇ*. 1. 4: “cremation ground,” *īmavaṇam*. 1. 6: “we ponder,” *ārāyvōm*. 1. 8: “should we see him one day,” *nām avaṇai kāṇalurra ṇāṇru*; “we shall ask him” is implied. On a related theme see v. 43.

26.

His long matted locks
are like the golden crest of a mountain;
his stained throat
is like a flash of lightning;
and prominent on his chest
lies the cobra beside the shimmering skulls.

27.

Oh lord who discharged a single arrow
at the triple forts of his foes and
destroyed their power,
we have pleaded over many days
that you should not favor a cobra
to adorn your chest:
Ornament yourself instead
with a necklace of gold.

Notes: 1. 2: “triple forts of his foes,” a reference to one of Śiva’s Eight Mythological Deeds (the story is discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). 1. 4: “we have pleaded,” *paravit tolūtīrantōm*.

28.

He is well-adorned, with
one cobra ornamenting his body,
another as a belt across the wild skin,
and still another atop his golden locks;
but what is its significance
to me the unfortunate?

Notes: 1. 3: “as a belt across the wild skin,” *ponkataliṇ nanaka mel*, a reference to Śiva wearing the skins of wild animals he had conquered, such as the elephant demon Gajāśura. The phrase can also translate to “as a bow-string of the war-like skin,” referring to a bow-string made out of the cobra’s skin, such as he uses in his destruction of the Triple Cities.

29.

All those who do not understand
the meaning of the lord reject him:
Outsiders see his fragrant sacred body
adorned with ash
as the form of a *pēy* wearing skulls.

Notes: 1. 2: “meaning,” *poruḷ*. 1. 4: “outsiders,” *piṛar*. 1. 6: *pēy*, “ghoul” (I discuss my translation of the word as such in [Chapter 3](#)). This poem mixes a second person vocative (*kaṇṭīr*, “see”) in with its third person descriptions; I have chosen to omit the vocative.

30.

He is the one whose grandeur
cannot be known by anyone,
yet he is the one whose great consciousness
can be known to us,
for he is our lord adorned with the skulls of others
who joyfully dances on the fire
accompanied by harsh *pēy*
at night.

Notes: 1. 3: “great consciousness,” *pēruṇarvu*; the sense is that “he is capable of being understood,” or “his great significance can be known.” The verse uses *piṛar*, “others,” once to indicate those to whom the Lord cannot be known, and another time to indicate those to whom he can; I have rendered the second as “us” to agree with “our lord,” *emmāṇār* (1. 5).

31.

Oh, my simple heart
happily flourish
in the human community,
for you have reached
a splendid great safety.
Up to the present day
you have been a servant
with great overflowing love
for the lord who wanders about
adorned by the bones of others
yet immune to any reproach.

Notes: 1. 1: “simple heart,” *maṭanañcē*. 1. 5: “safety,” *cēmam*; in the sense of “refuge,” “shelter.” 1. 7: “servant,” *āṭpaṭṭa*. 1. 8: “great overflowing love,” *pēr anpē . . . perukku*. 1. 11: “immune to any reproach,” *ikaḷātē*, lit., “without any reproach.”

32.

A ray of light
flowing from the young crescent moon
atop his luminous red matted locks
appears as a sacred thread
across the chest of the lord
who has the eternal third eye on his forehead
who burned the triple cities in times of yore
and who is first among the gods.

Notes: The sacred thread is a marker of religiously privileged status and is worn primarily by Brahmin males.

33.

Let them go around
speaking only superficially
about learned texts;
the lord with the sapphire-hued throat
is the highest.
For those who perform austerities
to any of his forms,
he will appear in that form.

Notes: 1. 2: “superficially,” *nuḷai ilātār*, lit. “without subtlety.” 1. 3: “learned texts,” *nūlarivu*. 1. 5: “highest,” *nīrmaiye*. 1. 6: “austerities,” *tavaṅkaḷ*. ll. 7 and 8: “form/forms,” *kōlam*, *uruvu* (both are used).

34.

We do not know the ways cruel karma
will affect us –

with a flaming arrow
he destroyed the aerial triple cities
of those who praised
themselves as “we who are most powerful” –

but cruel karma will punish
those who do not approach him sincerely.

Notes: l. 1: “cruel karma,” *valvinai*; it is implied in l. 7. l. 8: “sincerely,” *ullattāl ulli*, lit. “thinking through the heart.”

35.

Night,
fearing that the rays of the bright moon
would destroy it,
took asylum in the form of a sapphire stain on the throat
of the lord who adorns himself
with the dangerous cobra
of patterned throat and hood.

Notes: The poem presents two inimical forces borne by the Lord, the snake and the moon, and he manages them both. l. 6: “dangerous,” *pēl vāy*, lit. “open-mouthed,” or about to bite, in contrast to the beauty of its patterned skin.

36.

You who bear the sapphire stain,
the young moon is waning
thinking the snake atop your long matted locks
will swallow it;
alas, due to its fear of that snake
moving across the trembling sky,
it will not wax.

37.

One who prays with true mind and body
without overlooking anything
to the lord
whose matted locks bear the moon
who destroyed the triple fortresses
of the belligerent and arrogant foes
will not be reborn in this world as flesh and bone.

Notes: l. 1: “with true mind and body,” *matiyāl enpu ākkaiyāl . . . ēttuvarēl*, lit., “if one prays with body and understanding.” l. 6: “overlooking,” *ikaḷātu*, lit. “without negligence”; “anything” is implied.

38.

By its bite, the lustrous cobra
diminishes the moon
that rises in the sky full of light;
alternatively,
the moon resembles
the sharp horn of the black boar
that glitters on the chest of the lord
where the cobra laces his garlands.

Notes: l. 4: “alternatively,” *pōlātē*; in Tamil the term has a nuance that negativizes the first alternative, viz., “it is not like that but instead like.” The verse thus offers two competing explanations for why the moon is shaped like a crescent.

39.

The beautiful one
takes as half his coral hued body
the lady as lovely as blossoms;
his body appears as a red-gold mountain
and, when covered by sacred ash,
it appears as a silvery mountain.

Notes: “Red-gold mountain” could refer to Mt. Meru or to Tiruvaṇṇāmalai; “silvery mountain” could refer to Mt. Kailāsa.

40.

Oh, simple heart,
worship the feet of the servants
who recite hymns
devoted to the lord
who wears the moon
as a small garland that adorns no other;
avoid the company of those who do not take him to heart.

Notes: l. 2: “servants,” *tonṭar*. l. 3: “recite hymns,” *vāyālum colli*, lit. “say/sing with the mouth.” l. 4: “devoted,” *kuṟittu*, lit., “intended.” l. 7: “take him to heart,” *koṇṭārmāṭ(tu) ullātār*; could also be rendered as “those who do not think of him.”

41.

If it is the case
that one half is Māl who measured the world
and the other half is Umā,
since we do not find your color
on either of the two sides of your body,
we cannot distinguish your form from the dark form.

Notes: The poet's choice to portray both Māl (Viṣṇu) and his sister Umā (Pārvatī) together as halves of Śiva's body is unusual compared to mythological and iconographical representations, and may represent an innovation on the part of the poet; see also v. 59. ll. 4–6: “your,” *nin*, the familiar form of “your.” l. 6: “the dark form,” *minnuruvo*, lit., “lightning form”; lightning occurs when the sky is dark, and Māl and Umā are both dark in comparison to Śiva's red color.

42.

Has the young moon shrunk
because the cobra bit it?
Did you trim it
so you could wear it?
Will it not again mature
as a child grows?
Alas, this is the plight of the young moon.

Notes: l. 3: “you,” *nī*, the familiar form of “you.” l. 7: “plight” is implied.

43.

If the luminous celestials
cannot forbid our Peruman
adorned with the moon on his crest
by begging, “Please do not wander about seeking alms,”
what power could
our prohibition have?
He is known only to himself.

Notes: l. 2: “our,” *eṇkaḷ*. l. 6: “our prohibition,” *yām vilakka(m)*.

44.

I have taken refuge in him
and live as a servant
to the lord who is distinguished
as the sweetness in my heart
the husband of Gaṅga
the one who received the name “red-bodied”
the lord of the gods:
Why has he not bestowed grace on me?

Notes: l. 2: “as a servant,” *aṭiyaṇāy*. l. 3: “sweetness in my heart,” *maṇakk(u) iṇiya*. l. 6: “received the name ‘red-bodied’,” *ceṃmēṇip pērāḷaṇ*; the name “Civaṇ” (Śiva) means “the red one.” l. 8: “grace,” *aruḷ*.

45.

Following the great path
of worship to the lord,
desiring his supreme grace,
you ask where the lord resides:
It is easy for those like me to see
that he lives in our minds.

Notes: l. 3: “supreme grace,” *pēraruḷē*. l. 4: “you ask,” *eṇṇīrkaḷ*. l. 6: “he lives in our minds,” *cintaiyiṇum iṅkurrāṇ*.

46.

Is it not easy?
You poor people lack any knowledge
and are pitiable, alas;
it is better to live
as those whose innermost thoughts
are on our father whose throat shines,
our lord who wanders adorned with the cobra.

Notes: ll. 2–3: The verbs for lacking knowledge and being pitiable are marked with second person plural endings. l. 5: “as those whose innermost thoughts,” *uḷ niṇaintu cintaiyarāy*.

47.

Oh you simple heart,
can you acquire him any other way
besides his grace?
Blessings allow one
to reach the lotus-like feet
of the lord who gives half of his body
to the red-eyed lady.

Notes: l. 3: “grace,” *tīrattāl*, lit. “by the eternal”; I am following commentator CAVM here. l. 4: “blessings,” *tiru*, lit. “sacred wealth.” l. 7: “red-eyed lady,” *nīratta iruvatikkaṇ eḷai*; could also be rendered as “the lady of the colorful two sides” or “the lady of the two sides of the chest.”

48.

The lord sees
that the tender crescent moon
looks like the powerful tusk of the boar
on his holy chest;
but the cobra, who has no knowledge of this,
even today does not see that it is only one moon.

Notes: l. 6: “it is only one moon,” *itu mati eṇ(ru) oṇṇāka*; the cobra tends to view the moon as an enemy or a rival, not simply a planet.

49.

The radiating light
of the curved young moon
twists with the matted locks
of the incomparable one
and they appear as gold and silver thread.

Notes: The Lord’s locks are red-gold; the rays of the moon are silver.

50.

The lord’s locks billow:
on one side
are the blue curls
of the well-born lady
who is half of the lord
who keeps the beautiful moon
on the right side of his head;
on the other side,
there are dangling blossoms of the *konrai* flower.

Notes: l. 1: “the lord’s locks billow” is added for clarification. His matted locks are red-gold; the blue curls of the goddess provide a contrast on the left-hand side of his head. On the right-hand side there are dangling blossoms that cascade yellow; following commentator CAVM.

51.

The beautiful lady
adorned with half plait and bangles
who shares your body
should not be brought along
when you dance on the flames
accompanied by *pēy*
at the cremation ground
in the middle of the night,
your anklets ringing.

Notes: l. 2: “small plait,” *kuḷalār cirupuraṁ*; the plait is half sized since she is half of his body. l. 3: “shares your body,” the poem implies “body” by its description of “as one,” *ēka*, and “half,” *pākam*. l. 5: “you,” *nī*, familiar form of second person singular pronoun. l. 10: “anklets ringing,” indicating the strenuousness of the footwork. For a related theme, see v. 99.

52.

If it seems as though the full moon
is arising across the wide red heavens,
this is actually the radiance
of the garland of skulls
on the red matted locks
of the lord who is half
Tirumāl of the red eyes.

Notes: l. 3: “actually,” *ovvātē*, a negative comparative element (“not like”). l. 4: “garland of skulls,” *ciramālai*, following CAVM.

53.

The golden locks of our lord,
vibrant with
fierce cobras,
the flooding waters of the river
that descends from the heavens,
and blossoming *konrai* flowers,
appear to onlookers
as clouds in the rainy season.

54.

Oh, our lord of the third eye
whose throat is darkened –
where did you hide yourself?
Though Tirumāl
moves with you in the same form,
has a body like a rain cloud,
and is half of you,
he could not find you in days of yore.

Notes: The poem refers to the myth of Śiva becoming the fiery *liṅgam*. l. 1: “our,” *em*. l. 3: “you hide,” *oliṭṭāy*, using the informal second person ending. l. 4: Tirumāl (Viṣṇu) is not named in the verse but is implied by the description. ll. 5 and 7: “with you” and “of you,” *niṇ*.

55.

When in times of yore
the lord who bears the cobra
drank the poison
from the awesome ocean
churned by the celestials
his neck darkened,
like a shadow across the silvery moon
that crowns his red matted locks full of snakes.

56.

You who are tinted silver from ash,
tell us if you value it,
considering it not a stain.
You who are crowned
with the moon,
we have heard it maligned
that you eat from a putrid skull.

Notes: The issue posed – “if you value it,” *nī matittiyāyiṇ* – has a double reference to the shadow on the moon of the preceding verse and to the practice of begging with a skull (begging is implied by his eating from a skull). It is also a rhetorical question: Since the Lord bears the moon and engages in the practice, obviously he would not consider these as “stains” (*vaṭu*). The poet refutes criticism, affirming the Lord’s alterity (and her own). l. 2: “you,” *nī*, first person singular. l. 5: “we have heard it maligned,” *puram pēcak kēṭṭōm*.

57.

Whenever you go begging
across this world,
see that you remove
the menacing cobra you bear;
or else chaste women,
fearful of the venomous
ornament dancing on your head,
will not offer alms.

Notes: This poem imagines the appearance of the Lord to people in the village. l. 1: “you,” *nī*. l. 5: “chaste women,” *tūya maṭavaralār*, lit. “those simple ones who are chaste”; “simple”/“innocent”/“unlettered” is frequently used to refer to women in Tamil classical literature, and women would be the ones at the home to serve the beggar.

58.

Being in the midst of
the raging fire and the thick darkness
is incompatible with the qualities
of the lord
whose body and matted locks
are as red as the sunset,
and the lady who shares his golden form,
her hair adorned with flowers.

Notes: As with the two preceding verses, this poem presents the poet's concern with appearances and their proper contexts. This poem, like others, contrasts the form of the Lord at the cremation ground with his beautiful form (see also vv. 13, 27, 29, 31, 43, 51).

59.

I cannot understand your true nature;
oh, lord of the third eye and darkened throat
who rides the bull,
please reveal it:
Which of your forms
will you ornament with sacred ash,
the side you share with the lady
or the side you share with Māl?

Notes: See also vv. 18, 28, and 61.

60.

The clouds that gather and conceal
the rays of sunlight that form a golden mountain
are but a reminder
of the time the lord
covered his sacred body
with the dark skin of the raging elephant.

Notes: This poem sets up a parallel and yet it revolves around the term *ovvātē*, “incompatible,” “incomparable,” or “does not suit.” Both the sky and the Lord bear the opposing or incompatible elements of light and dark, but the verse also implies that the two sets (sky, Lord) are not comparable, which I render as “but a reminder.” l. 4: “lord,” *amman*. l. 6: “raging elephant,” an allusion to the Gajāśura myth.

61.

I became your servant
even though I had not seen your sacred form;
still today, I have not seen it –
so what will I answer
to those who continually ask
“which is the form of your Lord?”
Which is your true form?

Notes: l. 2: “your sacred form,” *tiruvuruvam*, “your” is implied here and as modifying “servant” (“became servant,” *ātpattēn*) since she asks the question to God. l. 6: “your Lord,” *num pirāṇ*; *num* is second person plural, which can be used as a formal singular. l. 7: “true form,” *niṇṇuruvam*, lit. “your form.”

62.

Who knows
what he does or does not resemble
and what he will or will not become?
One day he came to earth
in the form of a powerful hunter
to fight against Arjuna
who was a hunter with a bow.

Notes: The poem suggests both that Śiva can take on any form, and that he will take on an appropriate form for devotees given the context. See also v. 33. l. 6: “Arjuna,” *vicayaṇ*. The story is from the *Mahābhārata* (*Vanaparvam* section); Arjuna performed austerities in order to compel Śiva to give him the all-powerful Pāśupatāstra weapon that would help he and his brothers win the internecine battle over royal succession. Śiva appeared in the form of a hunter. A fight between the “hunter” and Arjuna ensued when they both believed they killed the same wild boar. Pleased with Arjuna’s fighting skills, Śiva gave him the weapon.

63.

Oh, lord of indescribable luminosity,
tell us whether it is possible
for the brilliant moon on your matted locks
to illuminate the sky in daytime
as a rival to the beautiful reddish sun.

Notes: The theme of this and the next poem is Śiva as the Lord of competing elements. l. 4: “sky” is implied.

64.

Could the sun traverse the sky
as though competing with
the silver-rayed moon
in the way that the cobra
moves as the wind
through his heavenly red matted locks
that bear the moon?

Notes: Read with the previous verse, the rival elements remain the sun and the moon, with the cobra introduced here as a third element that rivals the sun in its pursuit of the moon (the myth of Rāhu, see v. 22). l. 1: “sky” is implied. l. 2: “as though competing,” *nēṭikkolvāṇ pōl*, lit. “as though looking for,” where “looking for” is reflexive, in the sense of “keeping an eye on.” l. 5: “wind,” *kālaiyē*, following the commentary of CAVM.

65.

His body is as luminous as morning
his covering of ashes has the brilliance of noon
his matted locks are the colors of sunset
and his throat is like the deepest night.

66.

You who bear the poison in your throat,
did the cobra that dances across your chest
get the poison in its throat
and a hood as black as night
from touching your darkened throat?

67.

Since he subdued
the cobra, the moon, the deer,
the pouncing tiger and the flowing water
the luminous golden-bodied
lord who has the third eye
wears the anklet on his sacred foot.

Notes: The Lord’s victories over these elements, all of which he wears on his body, are commemorated by the heroic anklet (following commentator CAVM’s suggestion of *vīram*, “bravery”). l. 4: “flowing water,” *tālaruvi*, lit. “flowing down,” referring to the Gaṅga as per CAVM.

68.

Wishing to prevent the pout
of the lady adorned with anklets,
the lord placed his head
on her feet reddened with henna,
and his locks that bear the young moon
turned as red as a beautiful sunset.

Notes: This poem, like others, suggests a reason for one of the Lord's attributes.

69.

Attaining the sacred feet
of the lord with the third eye
who is crowned by the crescent moon,
we ignore Yama;
in this life we bow, serve, and praise him –
what could touch us?

Notes: Yama, the lord of death, was conquered by the Lord's foot; see v. 80. l. 1: "sacred feet," *nalla aṭi*. l. 4: "Yama," *kūrṛai*. l. 5: "serve," *aṭimai*. "We" is indicated in the verse by verb endings and "us" as object.

70.

This is our greatest desire:
Would he not grant it?
Our father, show us one day
the place where you forever
dance on the fire
in deep night,
the twists of your matted locks
extending like flames.

Notes: This is the verse that interpreters view as anticipating the saint's poems on the cremation ground at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu; see also v. 86. A more literal translation of the first two lines is: "this is our greatest desire: wouldn't he without ever avoiding show it to us one day?" l. 4: "place," *iṭam*.

71.

If you should move
the youthful Gaṅga
who lies next to the celestial moon
to your left side,
we would not be able to see
any part of the daughter of the mountain
who is your left half;
only you can see all,
oh lord of the third eye.

Notes: Pārvaṭī is on the left side of the Lord and the moon is on the right side (see v. 50). The fanciful change is proposed to demonstrate that only the Lord can see all because he has the third eye. l. 2: “Gaṅga” is implied; the verse refers to a “youthful, simple woman,” *maṭappāvai*. l. 8: “left half,” *iṭappākam*.

72.

If it meant giving up
 beholding you
 venerating you as our father
 and serving you
I would not want to own the heavens;
you of the crescent moon
that rules the heavens,
protector of the seven worlds,
this is my wish.

Notes: l. 4: “serving,” *kaippaṇi*, lit. “service with the hands.” l. 5: “I,” *yāṇ*.

73.

My dear heart
I say that all of your desires
can certainly be satisfied right away
if you always pray with love
to the lotus feet
of the lord who bears
the full, undulating waves.

Notes: l. 1: “heart,” *uḷḷamē*. l. 2: “I say,” *nān connēn*. l. 4: “love,” *virumpi*. l. 7: “undulating waves,” *parut taraṅkam*, a reference to the Gaṅga.

74.

If they say
that all the roaring waves in the seas
cannot cause it to be filled,
how is it that the skull
he uses as a vessel
is filled by the alms
of unselfish women?

Notes: l. 7: “unselfish women,” *pētaiyarkaḷ eṇṇātu*. I translate the first term, which could mean “people,” as “women” since traditionally women are the ones who offer alms from the home; see also v. 57. I translate the second term, which

could mean “without thinking” and perhaps “unlettered,” as “unselfish” to convey the implied moral force that the women freely offer without any expectation for themselves.

75.

The whirling long matted locks
of the lord who is the essence of goodness
are like the heavens, since
the flowing waters of the Gaṅga,
the brilliant moon,
and the cobra
traverse them.

Notes: All of the named elements cross the heavens: The Gaṅga (which is cited by name in the verse) originates in the heavens then crosses down through Śiva’s matted locks to flow onto the earth via the Himalayas; the moon crosses the skies every night; and the cobra is a form of the planet Rāhu. l. 2: “goodness,” *ṇalam*.

76.

When the celestials
who belong to the heavens
bow in worship,
their jeweled golden crowns
rub and tear
the beautiful lotus-like feet
of our father,
making me feel sorry they are marred.

Notes: l. 5: “tear,” *mucintu*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 3,235) cites this verse as the term’s earliest appearance with this meaning. l. 8: “me feel sorry,” *pāvam*, “me” implied by the personal nature of the thought; this term is used in contemporary times to express sorrow. The *Tamil Lexicon*, which provides historical uses of terms, does not list a source for this term as an “exclamation of pity”; perhaps the poet is on the vanguard of this usage.

77.

When his feet stamp
the underworld shakes;

when his locks whirl
the heavens vibrate;

when his armbands revolve
the cardinal directions shift;

he knows that this place
cannot withstand his dance.

Notes: The verse describes the universal form of Śiva as the Cosmic Dancer. The single verb used to describe both his movements and their effects is *pēr*, “to move,” especially in the sense of “to change” or even “to destroy.” These associated meanings seem to have inspired commentator CAVM to suggest that, since the Lord knows that his dance will disturb his *bhaktas* (as well as the cosmos), he dances more slowly.

78.

Could the lord who dances
at the burning ground
where the *pēy* live
only silently pity all souls?

Oh unfortunates,
should he show pity,
what would he not bestow:
He will give all the world
to those who humbly appeal to him
over many days.

Notes: l. 2: “burning ground,” *kāṭu*. l. 4: “souls,” *uyir*. “silently pity,” *vālā iraṅkum*. l. 5: “unfortunates,” *ēlāy* (second person vocative). l. 9: “humbly appeal to him” is the sense of the more literal “serve him with prayer,” *irantār paṇintu*.

79.

Offering service,
adorning with blossoms
the feet of the lord with long matted locks,
and praising the one who is so adorned:
This service to our father
is the joy of those who think constantly of him.

Notes: This verse describes the nature of a *bhakta*. l. 6: “service,” *āṭceyyap perra itu* (following CAVM in taking *kolō* as an excess syllable). l. 7: “joy,” *cerukku*; the term in its negative sense, “pride,” begins the next verse in the Tamil.

80.

His revered foot
crushed the powerful many-shouldered giant
who arrogantly lifted the mountain,
foiled holy Ayaṇ and Māl
who wept and then joyfully praised him
when they could not find it,
and kicked Yama into submission.

Notes: The verse describes how the Lord's foot, the lowest part of his body, destroyed the arrogance of several superhuman beings: A demon foe (Rāvaṇa, not named), fellow deities (Ayaṇ, who is Brahma; and Māl, who is Viṣṇu; the allusion is to the myth of Śiva as the fiery *linkam*), and the Lord of Death (Yama; here, *kālaṇ*, "lord of time"). Śiva as the *linkam* is one of His Eight Heroic Deeds (Līṅodbhava); see v. 19. Śiva as the destroyer of Yama is another of His Eight Heroic Deeds. In this story, Mārkaṇḍeya, the son of a sage, was predestined to live for only sixteen years. On the day he was supposed to die, he was worshipping a Śiva *linkam*; when death (Yama) approached, Mārkaṇḍeya clung to the *linkam* and cried out to Śiva. The Lord appeared from the *linkam* and kicked Yama into submission, gaining immortality for the boy. l. 1: "his revered" is implied; what is said at the very end of the Tamil verse, which is a typical location for the subject and increases the dramatic emphasis, is *kāl*, "foot." l. 2: "giant," Rāvaṇa; a demon who became a *bhakta* from this incident; see v. 18.

81.

We have conquered death
 escaped from cruel hell
 and uprooted the results of the previous two karmas,
 for we rely on the lotus-like feet
 of the beautiful lord
 who discharged a flaming arrow
 that destroyed the ones within the powerful forts.

Notes: The verse alludes to the myth of the triple cities; the implied interpretation is that the Lord saves the ones who are good by their devotion, in contrast to the arrogant demons of the triple cities. l. 1: "we have conquered," *veṇṇōm*. "death," *kālaṇ* (Yama). l. 2: "hell," *narakam*. l. 3: "two karmas," *iruvinaiyum*; suggesting good and bad karma.

82.

If one understands,
 it is clear that
 the lightning-like brilliance
 of the lord's matted locks
 with their hue of fire more red
 than the light of the setting sun
 resembles gleaming gold to those adhere to him
 and flames to those who oppose him.

Notes: l. 2–3: "Lightning-like brilliance . . . is clear," *enṇu uraikkum miṇ*, lit. "the lightning indicates that." Some translators and commentators assume a female agent (also a meaning of *miṇ*) who is like lightning. l. 7: "those who adhere to him," *carntar*, lit. "those who join him; those who take his side." The contrast is

with those “who move away” from him, *pērentār*. Other verses that make this or a similar contrast include vv. 29, 30, 40, and 61.

83.

If the lord who is like lightning
joined with Māl here on earth,
how would it appear to onlookers?
They would say that it is like
a tall blue sapphire mountain
standing besides a golden one.

Notes: ll. 5–6: Māl (Viṣṇu) is blue; Śiva is golden.

84.

The gaze of his third eye,
which can appear as
 long flames of fire
 soft cool moonlight
 or the harsh rays of the sun
immediately burned to ashes
the three fortresses
of his formidable foes.

Notes: l. 5: “of the sun” is implied. l. 6: “to ashes” is implied. l. 8: “formidable foes,” *neṭitāka viṇṭārkaḷ*. This verse, which posits causality between the gaze of the third eye and the blaze that destroyed the triple cities, is a distinctive interpretation of the myth, which says a single flaming arrow caused the implosion. In other poems the poet mentions the arrow (vv. 27, 34, 81); in v. 32 the eye is suggested.

85.

If I were blessed to behold
the highest form of the lord,
 would I see him in visible form
 clasp my hands in honor
 focus my mind only on him
and forever experience the bliss
of the lord of the celestials
 who dances on the flames?

Notes: l. 1: “if I were blessed to behold,” *kāṇap peṇin*; “I” is implied by the use of “my” (*en*) in the verse. l. 2: “highest form of the lord,” *periyān*; could also be rendered “highest lord.” l. 3: “see him in visible form,” *kaṇṇāarak kaṇṭum*. l. 6: “bliss,” *inpu*. ll. 6–8: An alternative translation is: “and the lord of the celestials who dances on the flames would forever rejoice.”

86.

If I obtain this,
 I would not wish for anything else,
 whether I had already earned it or not;
 the lord who has another eye on his forehead
 has made me understand a little
 and I have joined his good band of *pēy*.

Notes: This is another verse that interpreters understand to anticipate the poet's verses on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu; see also v. 70. l. 1: "I," *nam*, could be rendered as the first person plural, "we," inclusive of speaker and hearer; the term is frequently used in everyday Tamil as the first person singular and is thus distinguished from the formality of the English "royal we." I use the first person singular here since the content is connected with the previous verse ("this" being the vision described in v. 85). l. 5, "made me understand a little," *cīrit(u) uṇartti*, a causative form of the verb.

87.

If we attain
 our incomparable lord of wisdom
 by lovingly praising him with garlands of words
 and adorning his golden feet with ribbons of flowers
 we have cut off our negative karma –
 in what way could its stain afflict us?

Notes: l. 1: "if we attain," *nām parrināl*. l. 2: "lovingly," *aṇpay*. l. 2: *nām ōr aṇvīn*. ll. 3–4: "garlands" and "ribbons," *mālai*; "garland of words," *nāmālai*, lit., "garland of the tongue." l. 5: "stain," *iruḷ*, lit. "darkness"; CAVM takes it as "suffering."

88.

Oh, incomparable lord
 who bears the bright moon
 in the shape of a smile
 atop his red matted locks
 and bestows us with grace,
 should I describe your iridescent throat
 as night, a dark cloud, or a flawless sapphire?

Notes: This and other verses specify that the Lord is incomparable (here, *onṛutaiyāy*, vocative second person singular), and yet comparisons are suggested; the juxtaposition raises the issue of the limits, yet necessity, of language and its poetic usage. See also vv. 6, 18, and 24, and 61. l. 3: "in the shape of a

smile,” *nakku*, lit. “laughing”; it suggests the shape of the crescent moon. l. 5: “us with grace,” *aruḷ emakku*; “I” in the next line is implied and could also be rendered as “we.” l. 6: “iridescent,” *oḷi*.

89.

Oh, lord whose gaze
reduced the powerful god of love to ashes
and who resides in thoughts that are clear:
Tell us why
it was your throat that darkened
though your mouth consumed the glossy poison.

Notes: l. 2: “powerful god of love,” *vaṇmatan* (Kāma); the verse specifies that he carries a “sweet bow,” *oḷivili* (*oḷi*, lit. “bright”), a reference to the mythological description of Kāma’s bow being made of sugar cane, distinguishing it from weapons of destruction. Burning the god of love is one of Śiva’s Eight Heroic Deeds; in the mythology, Kāma is sent by the gods to interrupt Śiva’s meditation so that he will marry Pārvatī and bear a son who will rid the world of evil agents. As Kāma aims his arrow, the Lord’s third eye opens and burns him to ashes. Later, Śiva marries Pārvatī and from their union is born the handsome warrior Skanda.

90.

Our father,
tell us what you would do
if the waves of the roaring Gaṅga
along with the white moon
and the sleek cobra with ferocious eyes
rose up and disheveled
your coiled matted locks.

Notes: l. 7: “coiled,” *kuḷir*, in the sense of composed.

91.

As servants full of praise
for the red feet
of the lord whose red locks
bear the river,
we understand him;
don’t you know this?
We are established in him
for this life and those to follow,
so why do you find fault with us?

Notes: l. 5: “we understand,” *yām uṇarntōm*. l. 6: “don’t you know this,” *terimiṇō*; *miṇ* is a second person plural form. l. 9: “find fault,” *puṇaṇuraippa*, lit., “speak to

the back” (but not necessarily speaking behind the back, as the English idiom would suggest; it is probably openly stated criticism). For another verse that confronts critics, see v. 56.

92.

He owns me
he is the entirety
his essence is beyond his self
his pure matted locks are like coils of gold
he blessed the celestials with his grace.

Notes: l. 1: *eṇṇai uṭaiyāṇ*. l. 2: “entirety,” *ekamay*, unity or whole. l. 3: *tannai aṟiyāta taṇmaiyaṇum*, lit. “he is of the nature that does not know himself” (CAVM takes it as not being proud). This verse frames the majesty of the Lord with the perspective of the devotee as servant.

93.

Oh, dear heart
see him as lord of the celestials
see him as the lord who has a beautiful coral hue
see him as the lord whose neck is darkened
and desire him with a love that is true.

Notes: l. 1: “dear heart,” *nanēṇṇē*; can also be rendered as “dear mind.” l. 5: “love,” *aṇpu*.

94.

Oh, lord who rides the bull
that is Māl as dark as a cloud,
tell us why you are not separate from
the daughter of the mountain:
Is it because of love?
Is there no other place?
Is she afraid of being alone?

Notes: In the myth of Śiva destroying the triple cities (one of His Eight Heroic Deeds), Māl becomes the mount from which Śiva launches his flame-tipped arrow, and Brahma is the charioteer (the arrow is also composed of Brahma as the shaft and Māl as the flaming tip). For this mythological motif see vv. 27, 32, 34, 37, and 81. l. 3: “us,” which is implied, could also be rendered as “me.” l. 4: “daughter of the mountain,” *poruppaṁ makal*; a reference to Umā/Pārvatī. l. 5: “love,” *viruppu*.

95.

That lady
is from an auspicious family
and will not depart;
nor will this aquatic lady.
You who are adorned
 with skulls and white ashes,
since you cannot be separated from them
tell us which of the two blessed with your love is dearest.

Notes: l. 1: “that lady,” *avaḷ*; Umā/Pārvatī is implied; “this aquatic lady,” *ivaḷ ōr calamakaḷ*; Gaṅga is implied. l. 7: “you cannot be separated,” *pirintariyīr*, lit., “you do not know separation.” l. 8: “us,” which is implied, could also be rendered “me.” “love,” *aṇpu*.

96.

Who can see him?
We have cloaked the lord called Hara
with our love,
hiding him within our own hearts
 as entitled by our abundant praise
 and our devotion.

Notes: l. 1: “who can see him,” *ār vallār kāṇa*. ll. 4–6: The last three lines read literally as “holding within our own hearts by rights (*tāyattāl*) of abundant praise (*cīr valla*), we keep hidden (*vaittōm maraittu*) by *māya* (*māyattāl*).” CAVM takes “abundant praise” to mean praise through hymns, and I agree with him. I also agree with him in taking *māyam*, lit., “power of illusion,” as “devotion,” since that is the “power” of the devotees.

97.

You are the blazing fire
that arises and sweeps
across the three worlds,
filling them and
burning them completely:
Is this fire stored hidden in the seven worlds
or if not, do you keep it carefully in your palm?

Notes: This verse asks where the fire of dissolution is kept before the final day of destruction. Holding the fire in the palm suggests the iconography of Śiva as the Lord of Dance (Nāṭarāja); see the next verse.

98.

Would the palm of your hand
turn red from the flames dancing in it?
Or would the flames turn red
from the beauty of your palm?
You who dance on the fire
where the *pēy* live,
bearing bright flames in your palm
with anklets ringing
make your reply to this.

Notes: Śiva is known to be naturally red in color, both his body (vv. 4, 39, 41, 58) and especially his hair (15, 32, 49, 50, 52, 55, 58, 64, 68, 82, 88, 91 – the last includes his feet, which are naturally red as also described in v. 1); here the poet poses that his palm could be an origin, or a recipient, of the color red. “Dance” (*āṭu*) is used three times in this verse, to describe the flames in the palm, to describe the anklets, and to describe the Lord’s performance on the fire.

99.

Answer me:
Is the dance you perform
adorned with the five-hooded cobra
who spits fire
watched by the lady with young breasts like bowls
or by the circle of *pēy* at the fiery cremation ground?

Notes: 1. 1: “answer me,” *ceppu eṇakku*. 1. 2: “dance you perform,” *āṭum naṭam*; “you” is implied. 1. 5: “bowls,” *ceppu ēntu*, a small raised vessel. In an earlier verse it was specified that the Lord should not bring the Goddess to the cremation ground (v. 51). An extended meaning of this verse would be to understand it as asking “for whose benefit” the dance is performed.

100.

If he moves
the earth will shake;
if he gazes
that direction will combust;
if he strikes
the entire world will cry.
Oh, lord as luminous as gold,
is your mount
a beast that battles on the mountain
a bull
or a thunderbolt?
Tell us.

Notes: l. 4: “combust,” *vēm*; taking it as *vēkum*, “to burn,” as per CAVM. l. 8: “your mount,” *niṇ ēru*. l. 12: “us” is implied.

101.

With heart melting,
Kāraikkāl *pēy* offered these words
as a garland of *antāti* verses in *veṇpa* meter;
those who recite them
will reach the lord
with their inexhaustible love and praise,
and undying devotion will be born.

Notes: This is a signature verse (*tirukkāṭaikkāppuc ceyyum*), of which the poems attributed to Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār are the earliest example in Tamil poetry. The verse provides information on the composer, the composition (often specifying the number of verses; in this case 100 can be assumed from the reference to *antāti*), and the benefits to an audience that would appreciate and propagate the composition. Signature verses became the standard concluding verse in Tamil *bhakti* poetry of the seventh–tenth centuries. l. 1: “heart melting,” *karaivu*, lit., “melt”; “heart” is implied. l. 2: “offered,” *col*; lit., “spoke.” “Words,” *urai*. l. 4: “those who recite,” *paravuvār*. l. 5: “reach the lord,” *aṇṇalaic ceṇru*. l. 6: “inexhaustible love,” *ārāta aṇpu*. l. 7: “undying devotion,” *pērāta kātal*.

Tiru Irattai Maṇimālai, Sacred Garland of Double Gems

1.

Oh, heart,
overwhelmed by burning afflictions
and frightened,
do not feel discouraged:
Worship the lord
who is crowned with
the mighty Gaṅga,
the waxing crescent moon,
and *erukkam* flowers.

Notes: l. 1: “heart,” *neṇcam*, can also mean “mind.” l. 4, “do not feel discouraged,” verb is in second person singular negative (*taḷarātu*), referring to the heart. The Tamil verse offers an elaboration in a phrase that uses this same verb, “avoid being weary as bones” (*eṇpāy taḷart(u) iṇk(u) iruttal tavirti*), meaning losing one’s vitality or, as I have glossed it, discouraged. *Eṇpāy* could also be taken as “you called,” referring to the heart. l. 5: lord, *īcaṇ* (which also begins the next verse).

2.

Should they
know of no other lord besides him;
enshrine him in their hearts;
praise him;
and live without ever forgetting him,
the lord will protect them
from rebirth in this wide world.

Notes: In the Tamil verse, *kūci* could be taken as “bashful” to modify hearts; commentator CAVM as well as translator T. N. Ramachandran go to lengths to explain that their hearts are bashful because they are ashamed at having thought of another God. I have omitted it in my translation as a filler syllable. l. 2: “lord,” *īcaṇ*. l. 5: “lord,” *pirāṇ*.

3.

Understand that
the lord of the long red-gold locks
entwined with hissing cobras
and clusters of *konrai* flowers swarming with bees
will not ignore the suffering
of those who adoringly praise him
day after day.

Notes: l. 1: “understand that,” *kaṇṭīr* (second person vocative); this word is also used in “Wonder” vv. 13, 29, and 91, in which I have taken it as an *acai* or “filler syllable.” l. 2: “lord,” *antaṇaṇ*. l. 5: “suffering,” *īṭar*.

4.

Oh, mind,
understand that
the one who is adorned with deadly cobras
instead of ornaments of pure gold
is a generous lord
who protectively embraces and blesses
those who surrender themselves to his refuge.

Notes: l. 1: “mind,” *neṇcam*, can also mean “heart.” l. 4: “instead of ornaments of pure gold,” *kontaṇainta poṇkaṇṭāl pūṇāte*, lit. “not adorned by gold that has joined with fire,” i.e., newly minted gold; I follow commentator CAVM on this. l. 5: “generous,” *vallāḷaṇ*, “powerful” in the sense of providing. l. 7: “surrender themselves,” *āṭpaṭṭār ālāmē*. “Refuge,” *taṇcam*.

5.

Oh, our Caṅkaraṇ,
who took up the bow
and with a single arrow
engulfed the enemies' triple cities in flames,
what if the plump-lipped daughter of the mountain
who shares your body
catches sight of the lady Gaṅga in your crown?

Notes: The reference to destroying the triple cities alludes to one of Śiva's Eight Heroic Deeds as described in mythology. Commentator CAVM refers to this poem as within the genre of "condemn prayer" (*nintā stuti*) that is found in Sanskrit literature and in Tamil Caṅkam literature (some of the poems about Pāri serve as the best examples). This genre seems to condemn or insult the subject, but it actually praises the subject. So, for example, this poem seems to "condemn" the Lord for harboring a lady (Gaṅga) other than his wife (Pārvaṭī, the daughter of the mountain lord); commentator CAVM explains that actually Pārvaṭī already knows about Gaṅga, and she is not angry because she understands that his bearing of the Gaṅga River is, like all of his acts, performed solely for the benefit of humankind. l. 4: "enemies," *muṇivār*, lit. "those who dislike." l. 5: "plump-lipped," the comparison in the verse is to a ripened fruit (*kaṇi*).

6.

Oh, mind
praise Caṅkaraṇ forever as
the holy one
who is pleased to bear the proud cobra atop his dangling locks
and the protector
who rescues us from piteously suffering on days of distress.

Notes: l. 1: "mind," *neñcam*, can also mean "heart." l. 2: "praise," *urai*, lit. "speak." l. 3: "holy One," *puṇṇiyaṇ* (paralleled in l. 5 by "Protector," *kāppāṇ*). l. 4: "proud," *poṇkam*, lit. "joy"; in this case, joy or pride at being on top of the Lord's head, since the cobra is usually described as encircling his waist or arm. l. 6: "piteously," *āvā enru*, lit., "moaning [the sound of woe] *āvā*." "Suffering," *āl*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 252) cites this verse as the earliest use of this term with this meaning. "On days of distress," *aṅku oru nāl*, lit. "that one day," the particular day when one cries in distress, or it could refer to the end of life.

7.

There is one thing that would be said
if you would care to listen,
oh, lord of the Vedas
crowned with
abundant *vaṇṇi* leaves,

honeyed *konrai* blossoms,
and the gushing Gaṅga
that yet leaves undisturbed
the hissing cobra atop the flowers in your red locks.

Notes: There are a number of challenges in translating this verse. One is that, depending on how one reads the verse, the “one thing” that the poet claims “would be said” is not necessarily specified. Other translators take the phrase *enrum toṭēl* as a command that the Lord “never touch” the hissing cobra; this serves as the “one thing” to be said. However, the phrase is not clear. According to its form, *toṭēl* does suggest a second person singular command, as other translators have rendered it, but given that the poet makes reference to the cobra as the Lord’s ornament several times (e.g., vv. 3, 4, 6, 17, 18), it would seem an unlikely command for her to ask the Lord not to touch the cobra. More in keeping with descriptions the poet has provided in other verses, I have taken the phrase as *enrum toṭāmal*, “leaves undisturbed,” lit. “without ever touching,” and applied it to the relationship between two of the elements on the Lord’s head, the Gaṅga and the cobra. With this rendering the “one thing” is left undetermined; perhaps it is a reference to the poet’s own prayers. l. 3: “lord of the Vedas,” *vētiyaṇ*. l. 5: *viraiḱkiṇṇa vaṇṇiyum*, here translated as “abundant *vaṇṇi* leaves” can also mean “raging fire,” an allusion to the myth of the triple cities, one of the Eight Heroic Deeds of mythology, in which Śiva’s anger takes the form of flames atop his head. l. 9: “hissing cobra,” *iraikṅṅa pāmpinai*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 335) cites this verse as the first appearance of this term with this meaning. Some commentators take *cev vaṇ* (“red heavens” or “red beauty”) to suggest “waxing crescent moon”; the related myth is that the serpent, Rāhu, devours the moon, causing a lunar eclipse, and so Śiva, the Lord of opposites, bears two inimical elements within his matted locks; this opposition is found in other poems attributed to Kāraikkāl Ammaiār. Other translators take the phrase to modify *toṭai*, “garland,” i.e., “red, beautiful garland.” I take it as an indirect reference to the Lord’s hair, where all of the elements described in the poem lie.

8.

In order to test the lord
who is the source and essence of the Vedas
and master of the auspicious ascendance of the Ātirai star,
Tirumāl took on the form of a powerful boar
but later acknowledged with a sigh that he could not.

Notes: l. 3: the Ātirai star is ascendant in the Tamil month of Mārkaḷi (Dec.–Jan.), and is considered to be especially sacred to Śiva, along with Mahāśivarātri (“The Great Night of Śiva” in Feb.–Mar.; see Prentiss 2006). In classical times, the poet-saint Appar (seventh century) provided a detailed description of the Ātirai festival at Tiruvārūr (*Tēvāram* 6, poem 21, “Tiruvātirait Tiruppatikam”; see [Chapter 5](#) of this volume); today, the festival is celebrated at Śaiva shrines in south India, such as Chidambaram (in which the poet-saint Māṇikkavācakar is especially honored;

see Younger 1995, 54–67). 1. 4: Tirumāl’s (Viṣṇu) appearance as a boar to test Śiva alludes to one of the latter’s Eight Heroic Deeds as described in mythology. Śiva took on the form of a fiery column that reaches far into the earth and up to the heavens (Skt. *jyothi*, Tam. *cōti*); Viṣṇu as a boar burrowed into the earth to discover its source, while Brahma flew on his mount to the heavens to discover its summit, but neither were successful, demonstrating Śiva’s superior power. 1. 1: “test,” *cōtippāṇ*.

9.

If you in the ocean of troubled existence
desire eternal bliss instead of drowning,
hasten to worship forever the golden feet
of the eight-armed victor
who destroyed the enemy cities.

Notes: 1. 1: “if you desire,” *vēṇṭum enpīr*, lit., “you who say you desire.” “Ocean of troubled existence,” *kīlāyin tunpa vellak kaṭal*. 1. 2: “eternal bliss,” *inpam*. 1. 5: “enemy cities,” one of the Eight Heroic Deeds; see note to v. 5.

10.

Sages who realize the supreme
by controlling the crucial five senses and living humbly
can alone behold the red-gold feet
of the lord of the universe
whose star is Ātirai
and whose throat was darkened by poison.

Notes: Forms of the noun *talai* (“head,” “superiority”) are used to describe those who realize (“sages”), the Lord (“supreme”), and the five senses (“crucial”). 1. 2: “controlling the five senses” could, less fluidly, also be rendered as “maintaining [recitation of] the five-syllable mantra [the mantra *om namaḥ śivāya*].” 1. 5: “whose star is Ātirai,” see note to v. 8. 1. 6: “throat darkened by poison”; alludes to one of Śiva’s mythological Eight Heroic Deeds in which he swallowed the poison initially generated by the primordial churning of the ocean of milk by gods (*devas*) and demons (*asuras*) in their ultimately successful attempt to produce the elixir of immortality; the toxicity of this poison darkened his neck a blue-black color.

11.

Karma cannot affect merely the shadow
of those who behold his adorned feet
and safeguard themselves;
how could harmful past karma
possibly adhere to those of us who offer flowers
to our lord in the incomparable form
of the fiery *jyothi*?

Notes: ll. 1 and 4: “karma,” *viṇai*. l. 1: “karma cannot affect merely the shadow,” lit. “when karma sees the shadow it has no power” (*niḷarṇaṇṭa pōḷtattum nillār viṇai*). l. 2: The poem specifies that his feet are adorned with a natural reddish color and with anklets. l. 3: “safeguard themselves,” *tammaip pōḷalurrār*, probably a reference to protecting themselves through worship and prayer. l. 5: “those of us,” *nam*. “Offer flowers,” a form of worship; the verse specifies that this is done with the hand, perhaps a reference to gently tossing flower buds towards the image as one prays. l. 7: *jyothi* (Tam. *cōti*), see note to v. 8.

12.

Before the sorrows of karma surround you,
 worship without delay
 the lord who is resplendent in sacred ash;
 who struck the body of Yama;
 and who shares his body with the delicate lady Umā.
 Oh, mind, remember the lord!

Notes: l. 4: “body of Yama,” *kūrruruvam*, a reference to one of Śiva’s Eight Heroic Deeds, in which a childless sage, Mṛkaṇḍu prayed to Śiva for a son and was given the choice of a virtuous son who would live only sixteen years or an evil son who would live a long time; the sage picked the former. Mārkaṇḍeya was completely devoted to Śiva, and was worshipping a *liṅgam* when Yama, the God of Death, came to claim him. The boy clutched the *liṅgam* and cried for the Lord’s help. Yama threw his noose around the boy and the *liṅgam*, prompting an enraged Śiva to appear from within the icon, and he kicked Yama, killing him. The Lord granted Mārkaṇḍeya a boon that he would be sixteen forever, and he restored life to Yama. l. 5: “Umā,” Tam. Umai. l. 6: “Oh, mind, remember,” *neñcē niṇai*; could also be translated taking *neñcē* as “heart.”

13.

Oh, mind,
 remember the lord!
 Instead of taking comfort
 in thinking your wife and children a refuge,
 take as your sanctuary the feet
 of our father –
 the ruler of the gods and the universe;
 a flame that can never be extinguished;
 the one whose matted locks even the Gaṅga
 cannot drench.

Notes: l. 5: “take as your sanctuary”; this is implied by the contrast drawn in the verse. l. 6: “our father,” *nam tātai*. l. 7: “ruler of . . . the universe,” *aṇṭavāṇaṇ*. l. 8: “can never be extinguished,” *nontāta*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 2,367) cites this verse

as the first instance of this term with this meaning. l. 9: “Gaṅga” is implied; the general term for river (*āru*) is used in the verse.

14.

You bathe,
cover yourself with ash from the fire,
dance on the undying flames
and twist the river through your locks.
Why in times of yore did you crush
the demon with twenty heads and arms
for shaking the mountain?

Notes: l. 1: “You,” *nī*, the familiar form of the second person singular pronoun. The verse uses the verb *āṭi* to describe all of the actions of the Lord; the semantic range of the verb includes move, shake, dance, play, bathe. (The verb is implied for the giant’s actions.) In the case of “bathe,” the verse specifies *neyyāṭi*, which could refer to a bath using oil or using ghee, but the substance used to bathe in this verse is ambiguous since the scene is the cremation ground. l. 6: “the demon” (*arakkāṇ*) refers to Rāvaṇa of mythology, who wanted to uproot Śiva’s abode, Mount Kailāsa, from its foundation and carry it to his own kingdom in Laṅka; the verse refers only to “of the foundation,” *aṭṭalattin*, and “mountain” is implied. The verse portrays the Lord as one who is a master of opposite substances, liquid/ash, fire/water; the implied answer to its question is that after the Lord crushes Rāvaṇa, the latter becomes his opposite by repenting, and Śiva rewards him with boons.

15.

The holy lord
endlessly performs his dance
in that wide cremation ground
while the wasted *pēy* of powerful voices sing
and the *bhūtas* worship his anklet-bearing feet.
Why did you discharge a single flaming arrow
from your bow, engulfing the enemies’ triple citadels in fire?

Notes: l. 1: “holy lord,” *puṇṇiyaṇ*. l. 2: “dance,” *naṭṭam*. l. 3: “wasted *pēy*,” the verse specifies that they have parched yet powerful lips (*tiraṅkuvalvāyppēy*). *Pēy* can be either singular or plural. Notably, the verb “sing” (*pāṭu*) describes only the actions of the group of ghouls, goblins, and animals who accompany Śiva at the cremation ground (cp. “Decade-2” v. 1), as well as those who would sing Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s hymns (see “Decade-2” v. 11); it is not used to describe the poet-saint’s actions (cf. “Decade-1” v. 11 where a partridge sings but the saint says). l. 5: “*bhūtas*,” Tam. *pūtam*; the term is from Sanskrit mythology that describes Śiva’s host, and echoes the scene depicted in the *Tiruvālaṅkāṭu* verses (“Decades”). Alternatively, the phrase *pūtan tolacceyyum* could modify “the holy

lord,” indicating that he controls the five elements. ll. 6–7 refer to one of the Eight Heroic Deeds of Śiva; “you,” *nī*.

16.

They offer loving service
to the lord,
who is pleased to wear the split skin
of the powerful elephant
on his three forms,
by controlling the five senses,
analyzing and rejecting false paths,
and performing virtuous deeds.

Notes: l. 1: “loving service,” *ātpaṭṭa aṇpu*. l. 2: “lord,” *amman*, lit. “he of the mother”; in current Brahman dialect, this refers to the maternal uncle or father’s sister’s husband. Here, it is a term with kinship resonances indicating one who is concerned for our welfare. ll. 3–4: “split skin of the powerful elephant,” an allusion to one of the mythological Eight Heroic Deeds of Śiva. The sages of Darukavana Pine Forest sent Gajāsura (Elephant Demon) to attack Śiva for seducing their wives in his form of Bhikṣātaṇa (Enchanting Beggar). Śiva killed the demon and performed a dance of victory wearing his hide. There is another myth cycle in which Śiva offers Gajāsura, who had performed much penance, a boon and the latter requests that the Lord reside in his stomach. Eventually Pārvaṭī enlists Viṣṇu and Śiva’s bull Nanti (Nandi) to coax the demon to let Śiva out of his stomach. Śiva agrees to the demon’s request to be spiritually liberated, and his decapitation of the demon is said to achieve this effect. Later, Śiva uses Gajāsura’s head as a substitute for his son Gaṇeśa’s head, which he had severed in a fit of anger. l. 5: “three forms,” *mūvuruvum*, referring to Śiva as Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Brahma, indicating his superiority to the other two. l. 7: “analyzing and rejecting false paths,” *poyanneṛikkaṭ cārāmē eṇṇi*. l. 8: “performing virtuous deeds” is in the past tense in the verse.

17.

Though he is adorned with a bobbing cobra
that does not let anyone come near,
along with a garland of skulls and bleached bones,
and he is pleased to ride a fierce bull;
can one doubt there are ways to attain him through love?

Notes: This verse creates a distinction between the Lord’s outer appearance, which is frightening, and the internal love the devotee is to feel for him (cp. “Wonder” vv. 29, 30, 56, 57). l. 1: “bobbing cobra,” *ōr āṭu aravam*, lit. a dancing cobra. l. 3: “along with,” *atu vēyumaṇṇi*, lit. “apart from that” in the sense of “besides”; this would be a very early use of a prose form more commonly dated to the twelfth

Our Peruman has no mount other than a bull;
 he is the lord
 with the matted locks radiant with the flowing Gaṅga,
 who swallowed the poison spewed by a cobra
 when the gods churned the ocean of milk in times of yore.

Notes: 1. 2: “high-living people,” *uttamarāy vāl̥vār*; the verse contrasts this phrase to a description of the Lord as “supreme,” *uttamanāy*, continuing the theme of

material possessions/appearance vs. spiritual power of vv. 17 and 19. ll. 1 and 4: “oh heart . . . enthusiastically hear the glory,” *tīramē kēlālī neñcē kiḷarntu*. l. 6: “covers himself with ash,” *neyyāṭi*, could also mean “bathes in oil”; see note to v. 14. l. 7: “swallowed poison,” see note to v. 10. In the Tamil, this verse ends on *kiḷarntu*, lit. “to increase,” which links it to the first verse (where it takes on the nuance “overwhelmed”). There is no signature verse extant for this poem.

Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam, Sacred Decade of Verses on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu – 1

1.

The female *pēy* has
sagging breasts and bulging veins
hollowed eyes and bared teeth
ruddy down on her sunken belly
long canines
and lanky shins on knobby ankles;
she lingers, howling, at the cremation ground.

Dancing here,
with effortless composure
as his matted locks radiate in all directions,
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 1: “the female *pēy*,” *ōr peṇpēy*. l. 7: “cremation ground,” *ulaṟu kāṭu*. l. 9: “dancing with effortless composure,” *aṅkaṇ kuḷirntaṇa lāṭum*, lit. “dancing with cool/refreshed/composed limbs”; the contrast is between the Lord’s composure and the strenuousness of his dance (“matted locks radiate in all directions”), not between the heat of the fire (which, although described in other verses, is only mentioned here) and the “coolness” of his limbs. l. 10: “all directions,” *eṭṭut tīcaiṇum*, lit. “all eight directions” (includes south-east, north-west, etc.). The last line and a half in the Tamil, *āṭum eṅkaḷ appaṇiṭan tiruvālaṅkāṭē* (“dancing, our father (resides) at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu”), is a refrain found identically in vv. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, and 10 and slightly modified in vv. 5, 7, and 8.

2.

Sitting amidst thorny shrubs,
she pulls a charred stick from the fire,
breaks it and draws, laughing harshly.
Her gaze is furtive, like a frightened animal;
suddenly she jumps up,
singes herself in the searing fire
that consumes corpses,
and angrily tosses ashes to quell the flames.

Dancing here, our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: In the Tamil, the verse explicitly mentions the burning ground, *cuṭalai* (a term that the *Tamil Lexicon* first dates to *Maṇimēkalai*). There is no explicit subject mentioned in this poem for the activities described besides the Lord's dancing. My decision to render the subject as "she" is based on the fact that the only other verses that clearly describe actions by one of the inhabitants of the cremation ground (vv. 1 and 5) do explicitly describe a female subject.

3.

There, in the thickest darkness
of the dead of night
desiccated white fruits of the *vākai* rattle,
birds of prey screech
and an alarmed owl flutters on a branch.

In this cremation ground,
shadowed by dense chaparral,
dancing elegantly on the flames,
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 4: "birds of prey screech," *kūkaiyoṭu āṇṭalai pāṭa*, lit. "an owl and an *āṇṭalai* sing," with the latter a mythical bird of prey (the owl mentioned in l. 5 is *āntai*). l. 6: "in this cremation ground," *īmam iṭu cuṭu kāṭṭu akattē*. l. 7: "dense chaparral," specified in the verse as the plants *īkai* (shrub in the *Acacia* family) and *kaḷḷi* (shrub in the *Euphorbia* family); both are thorny shrubs that grow densely. l. 8: As in v. 1, the Lord is described as dancing with a "cool/refreshed body," *ākaṇi kuḷirntu*, which I again render as referring to his composure.

4.

A jackal digs consecrated food
out of the ritual fire pit and eats it;
the angry *pēy* cry,
"why didn't we see it first!"
and rush around striking one another.

At this cremation ground,
he performed the circular *uḷāḷam* dance
in a rivalry,
whirling and lifting his foot straight to the heavens.

Dancing, our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 1: "jackal," *kuṟunari*. "consecrated food," *cōru*. l. 2: "ritual fire pit," *ōmakkuḷi*. l. 3: *pēykaḷ*, plural of *pēy*, is used in the poem (if not otherwise specified in the notes, the term is used in the singular in the verse). l. 6: "cremation

ground,” *kāṭu*. ll. 7–8: The poem appears to allude to the legend of the dance competition with Kālī (Skt. Kālī) in its mention of “rivalry,” *vāti*, “to argue, dispute.” The *Tamil Lexicon* has an entry for *uḷḷāḷam*, defining it as “a kind of dance” (citing the *Piṅkalantai*, a dictionary from the ninth century). l. 9: “dance in which the foot is lifted straight to the heavens,” *eṭutta pātam aṇṭam ura nimirnta āṭum*.

5.

A goblin devours a glob of oozing flesh,
strings and wears a garland of white skulls,
brushes dust from the child
 she named Kālī and raised with care,
and offers her breast.
After she leaves
the child, not seeing her mother,
cries herself to sleep.

Dancing in this cremation ground,
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 1: “goblin,” *kaḷūtu*. l. 3: “child,” *piḷḷai*. l. 4: “she named Kālī,” *kāḷiyenru pēriṭu*; the name suggests that the child is female. l. 5: “offers her breast,” *mulai koṭu*. l. 9: “cremation ground,” *puram kāṭu*.

6.

Akin to birds of prey,
the *pēy* have thin legs and taloned feet
and deposit their young like eggs.
Owls, *pēy* and jackals
perform a frightful dance
in the cremation ground,
jumping, pawing and turning over
corpses abandoned there.

Dancing in leaps across this theatre,
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: ll. 1–3: The comparison between the birds of prey and the *pēy* is suggested, with ambiguity, by the verse. l. 1: The poem specifies individual birds of prey, including hawk (*paruntoṭu*), owls (*kūkai*, *āntai*), and quail (*pakaṇṭai*). l. 5: “frightful dance,” *aṇaṅku āṭu*; *aṇaṅku* is also used in “Decade-1” v. 7 and “Decade-2” v. 2; see my discussion of the term in [Chapter 4](#). l. 6: “cremation ground” is mentioned twice in the verse, as *kāṭu* and as *puram kāṭu*. l. 7: “jumping,” *piṇṇaṭi*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 2,651) defines this as “to jump, kicking heels against posteriors,”

and cites this poem as the term's first appearance. l. 9: "this theatre," my addition to *aṭṭamē*, "cross direction; side."

7.

Whirling,
their eyes and mouths ablaze,
the *pēy* perform the *tuṇaṅkai* in a circle;
their dance is fear-inducing,
in which they eat the flesh of burned corpses.

Dancing in this cremation ground
with leg lifted and anklets ringing
revolving body erect
emitting flames that scatter the foxes
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 3: The *Tamil Lexicon* describes *tuṇaṅkai* dance (*tuṇaṅkaiyiṭṭu ṍṭi āṭi*) as "a kind of dance in which the arms bent at the elbows are made to strike against the sides" (citing its useage first in the post-*Caṅkam* *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* or "Guide to Lord Murukan" v. 56; this poem, as I mention in Chapter 3 note 60, is either contemporaneous with Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār or later); I understand that the dance is performed in villages today as play (having nothing to do with a cremation ground). l. 4: dancing that is "fear-inducing," *aṇaṅku āṭu*; see notes to "Decade-1" v. 6. l. 5: "flesh," *taṭi*, following CAVM, who takes it as *tacai*. l. 7: the verse specifies two types of anklets, *kaḷal* (anklet of heroism) and *cilampu* (decorative anklet worn by women). l. 8: "revolving body erect," *vaṭṭaṇai* (y)ṭṭu *naṭṭam*; some translators take the term *vaṭṭaṇai* as a technical term, referring to a specific dance (*naṭṭam*) that is circular in nature. In this instance I take *naṭṭam* as "upright" and *vaṭṭaṇai* as a form of *vaṭṭaṇi* ("to make round or circular"), hence "revolving"; "body" is implied. l. 10: "scatter the foxes," *ōri katikka*, lit. "foxes hasten/move quickly."

8.

Upon death,
those who practiced and spread
the path of virtue in village and town alike
are shrouded and laid beside the corpses
encircled by *pēy* in that place.

Dancing in this cremation ground,
bearing snakes and holding fire,
causing the forests, beaches, mountains
and all of heaven and earth to revolve,
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 3: “the path of virtue,” *naṇ neri*. l. 6: “in this cremation ground,” I have added this implied phrase.

9.

Dancing,

accompanied by

a tune composed from the seven notes

tuttam, kaikkilāi, viḷari, tāram, ulai, ilī, and ōcai,

and the coordinated sounds of rattles, cymbals, the *vīṇā*

and many types of drum,

our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 3: “tune,” *paṇ*; “seven notes” is implied. The verse differs from current understandings of the order and names of the notes (Tamil *icai*; Sanskrit *svaram*); today they are known and ordered as *kural, tuttam, kaikkilāi, ulai, ilī, viḷari, tāram*; the commentator CAVM suggests that her list refers to the notes of a specific *paṇ* and is thus not a general listing of notes in ascending order. The *Tamil Lexicon* lists *Peruñ. Vattav.* (vv. 5, 6) as the earliest source of the list as it is currently understood today. The list of instruments in the order of the verse with present-day identifications from the *Tamil Lexicon* and the reference work, *Tamiḷcaik Kalaikkalañciyam* (in four volumes; Tiruccirāpaḷḷi: Pāratitācaṇ Palkalaikkalākam, 1992–2006; I thank Dr. Premila Gurumurthy, Chair of the Department of Indian Music at University of Madras, for lending me a copy of this book), is: *caccari* (small drum), *kokkarai* (possibly a rattle of dried seeds), *takkai* (hourglass-shaped drum hit with a stick), *takuṇitam* (drum; this verse is cited by the *Tamil Lexicon*, p. 1,708, as being this term’s first appearance), *tuntupi* (large kettle drum), *tāḷam* (small cymbal for keeping time), *vīṇai* (*vīṇā* or *veena*, stringed instrument), *mattaḷam* (drum), *karaṭikai* (lit. “bear hand”; drum said to sound like a bear), *vaṅkai mentōl* (lit. “hard hand soft leather”; CAVM suggests a drum clothed with soft skin on two hard sides; it could also be the case that the *karaṭikai* and the *vaṅkai* are two small *tabla* drums played by a single musician with the left and right hands), *tamarukam* (two-faced, hourglass-shaped drum associated with Śiva as Lord of the Dance; also known as *ḍamaru*), *kuṭamulā* (drum), *montai* (single-faced drum). The *Cilappatikāram* (ca. fifth century), *Paripāṭal* anthology of Tamil poetry (ca. sixth century) and the *Tevāram* hymns (ca. seventh–ninth centuries) are also early sources on Tamil *icai* (music).

10.

Agitated and unable to comprehend,

they bear the dead in biers

to the cremation ground

and perform the rites then light the pyres

which glow in the evening.

Thus illuminated,
dancing his cosmic dance
to the beat of celestial drums,
his anklets resounding in all directions,
our father resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu.

Notes: l. 3: “biers,” *canti*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 1,266) cites this verse as its first usage. It might also be understood as referring to a “crossroads” or “border”; traditionally women accompany the body to this point only. “Cremation ground,” *purai kāṭu*. l. 4: “perform the rites,” *kaṭamai ceytu*. The hymn specifies that the pyre is lit by a “suitable person,” *takkavar*, traditionally the eldest son. l. 8: “cosmic dance,” *māṇaṭam*. l. 9: “celestial drums,” *amarar muḷavu*; can additionally mean that the gods play the drums.

11.
The *pēy* of the incomparable lord
gather, clap one another
and join in a resounding cry;
a quail sings along,
accompanied by a jackal
who howls as lute.

Those who master
all of the previous ten verses
expressed in pure Tamil
by Kāraikkāl^{pēy} of the unruly locks
in celebration of the feet of the lord,
our father who resides at Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu,
will joyfully attain the bliss of Śiva.

Notes: l. 1: *pēy* is plural in the verse, *pēkaḷ*; “*pēy* of the incomparable lord,” *oppinai(y) illa vaṇ pēykaḷ*, which could also be rendered as “the harsh *pēy* who are all alike (without any distinction).” l. 6: “lute,” *yāl*. l. 8: “all of the previous ten verses,” *pattum*. l. 9: “expressed in pure Tamil,” *ceppiya centamiḷ*. l. 13: “bliss of Śiva,” *civakati*.

Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam, Sacred Decade of Verses on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu – 2

1.
The cremation ground
is strewn with mauled corpses;
their intestines hang on the chaparral
that lines the unpleasant grove
of trees and thorny shrubs.

Here,
pēy with eyes as wide as drum faces
 beat the drums and *bhūtas* sing,
 while the beautiful lord dances.

Notes: l. 1: “cremation ground,” *cuṭṭa cuṭalai*. l. 3: “chaparral” *kaḷli*, (shrub in the *Euphorbia* family; mentioned in “Decade-1” v. 3). l. 4: “unpleasant grove,” I have added this implied phrase. l. 5: “trees and thorny shrubs,” these are listed in the verse as follows, with contemporary identifications from the *Tamil Lexicon* added: *eṭṭi* (the poisonous Strychnine tree), *ilavam* (red flowered Silk-cotton tree; red is descriptive of Śiva and so this tree is often found at Śaiva temples), *īkai* (Acacia shrub; mentioned in “Decade-1” v. 3), *cūrai* (Jujube shrub), *kārai* (low shrub with sharp spines). ll. 7–8: the poet uses two different words for “drum”; when describing the eyes it is *paraī* and for playing it is *muḷavam*. “*Bhūtas*,” *kūḷi*; both terms describe the dwarfish figures who serve as Śiva’s entourage. As I discuss in Chapter 4, Cēkkīlār quotes from this poem in a revealingly edited fashion, leaving out the reference to the *kūḷi*. l. 9: “the beautiful lord dances,” *alakaṇ āṭumē*; this phrase also concludes vv. 2, 6, and 7.

2.
 On ground moistened by melted fat,
pēy of hollowed eyes and long teeth
 violently dance the *tuṇaṅkai* around the burning ground;
 when they see the pyres have extinguished
 they crowd to gorge gleefully on the corpses
 to their hearts’ content.

Here in this frightful burning ground,
 bearing fire in his palm,
 the beautiful lord dances.

Notes: l. 3: “violently dance,” *eṇintu*, lit. “throw; hit.” “*tuṇaṅkai* dance,” see notes to “Decade-1,” v. 7. l. 4: “pyres have extinguished,” *cuṭalai naṇiḷ*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 2,181) cites this verse as the first appearance of *naṇiḷ*. l. 7: “frightful burning ground,” *aṇaṅku kāṭu*; see notes to “Decade-1” v. 6.

3.
 Jackals snap at putrid skulls
 picked over by birds
 the piercing cry from one owl
 widens the eyes of a small one nearby
 while a still larger one menaces
 and foxes dart everywhere.

This is the great cremation ground
 where the lord prefers to live and dance.

Notes: l. 1: “jackals,” *nari*. l. 3: the owl that cries is *āntai*; the onomatopoeic sound it makes according to the verse is “*aṭku*.” l. 4: the small owl is *ciṟukūkai*. l. 5: the larger owl is *ūman*; the *Tamil Lexicon* (p. 497) cites this verse as its first appearance with this meaning. l. 6: “foxes dart,” *ōri katittu* (this same phrase is used in “Decade-1,” v. 7). The verb *piṭka* (from *piḷ*) appears nearby in the verse, suggesting that the foxes tear up corpses as they dart around. l. 8: “prefers,” *pēṇ*.

4.

Not knowing it a corpse

a *pēy* approaches it

prods it,

growls loudly,

angrily hurls a firebrand at it,

jumps over it, and then flees.

Other *pēy* respond by beating their hollow bellies

then running away in fear.

In the guise of a madman

the lord dances here.

Notes: This verse describes both the *pēy* and the Lord as acting unusually, as though “mad.” l. 1: “corpse,” *cetta piṇa*; unusual in her time period, the poet uses the adverbial participle (AvP) form of *cetta* (verb *cā*, “die”). l. 7: “hollow,” *pattal*, lit. “a gourd used as a vessel” (following CAVM). l. 8: “running away in fear,” *irintōṭa* (following CAVM). l. 10: “in the guise of a madman,” *pitta vēṭaṇ koṇṭu*; this description may have been a source for poet-saint Cuntarar’s famous first word of his collection of poems (constituting the seventh volume of *Tēvāram*), “Madman!” (*pittā*; in reference to the Lord); in addition, Cuntarar’s hymn, as with “Decade-2,” is set to the *intaḷam paṇ*. Verses 8 and 10 in the following also describe the Lord in particular forms.

5.

The bushes are scorched

the thicket is blackened

the skulls ooze liquid

and the chaparral have withered

amidst the tall trees.

In this smoldering burning ground,

clothed with the hide of the spotted deer

and caped with the pelt of the tiger,

the lord makes his home and performs his dance.

Notes: Terms for the desiccated flora include *mulli*, *muḷari*, and *kaḷli*, all thorn bushes. l. 5: “trees,” *veḷ*, glossed as *viḷāmaram* (“wood apple tree”) by CAVM.

ll. 7–8: allusions to animals sent by the sages of the Pine Forest (Dāruvana) to attack Śiva and his conquering of them. l. 9: “makes his home,” *paḷḷi(y) iṭam*.

6.

In this ancient burning ground
a colorful small owl
 with beak sharp as a sword
picks flesh from a corpse’s skull and cries
while a chorus of *pēy* and *bhūtas*
 eyes and mouths blazing
 hair fanned as a palmyra leaf
sound like a flute to accompany
the beautiful one’s dancing.

Notes: l. 3: the verse adds that the beak (*eyiru*) is curved and shiny (*vaḷaivāṇ*). l. 5: *bhūta*, *kūḷi*. l. 6: “blazing” is not metaphorical, but represents fiery or fire-emitting.

7.

In this miserable burning ground
young *pēy* scavenge the remnants
disappointedly find nothing to eat
and settle for sleep

while at twilight,
 flawlessly in time to the rhythm
 of celestial drums
 bearing fire in his palm
the beautiful one dances.

Notes: l. 1: “miserable burning ground,” *ciramp patukāṭu* (*ciramam*, “exhausting toil”). l. 3: “disappointedly,” *cintitt(u) iruntu*. l. 7: “celestial drums,” *amarar muḷavu*; can additionally mean that the gods play the drums.

8.

In this fearsome burning ground
the heat bursts the tall bamboo
 popping its white pearls
and desiccated *pēy*
clamor as they gather to feast on corpses

while the enchanter dances
 beheld with wonder
 by the daughter of the mountain lord.

Notes: l. 1: “fearsome burning ground,” *aṇaṅkum peruṅkāṭu*; see notes to “Decade-1” v. 6. ll. 2–3: The idea that bamboo produces pearls is an established trope in classical Tamil literature. l. 4: the verse specifies that the “desiccated *pēy* (plural in the verse) have tired bodies and dry hair. l. 6: “enchanter,” *māyaṇ*, lit. one who assumes many forms; the term is a personalized form of the Sanskrit philosophical term, *māyā*. l. 7: “wonder,” *maruḷ*, which can also convey “bewilderment.” l. 8: “daughter of the mountain lord,” *malaiyāṇ makaḷ*, a reference to Pārvatī.

9.

In this great burning ground
monkeys leap and vultures roost
in branches of bamboo;
pēy abound
and plumes of smoke rise from the glowing pyres

while the lord,
adorned with the curved axe
and the shimmering crescent moon,
dances to the rhythmic beat of drums.

Notes: l. 9: Two types of drum are mentioned, *tuṭi* and *parai*; both of these drums are frequently mentioned Caṅkam poetry, especially the *Puranāṇūru*.

10.

In this thorny, dark burning ground
all the *pēy*, whether short, small, tall or large
have bloated bellies
blazing mouths and teeth
and frighten and caress their young;

while they grunt as a kind of music
the flawless one
of thick, shiny matted locks, dances.

Notes: l. 1: “burning ground,” *mayāṇam*. l. 6: “grunt as a kind of music,” *koḷ(!) eṇru icai pāṭa*, lit., “sing as music by making the sound (“saying”) “*koḷ*.” “*Koḷ*” is a non-human sound; the poet used it to convey the sound of bamboo bursting to reveal pearls in v. 8. l. 7: “flawless one,” *vimalaṇ*; the term *malam*, “stain” or “impurity,” later became codified in Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy as “primordial fetter.”

11.

The lord,
crowned with the moon in his matted locks,
adorned by the bobbing cobra encircling his waist,
whirls in his sacred dance;

by his grace
Kāraikkālṃpēy of the blazing mouth and teeth
thrives at this burning ground;

those who sing her ten hymns and dance
will have all their ills destroyed.

Notes: l. 1: “the lord,” *aṭkaḷ*. l. 4: “sacred dance,” *tirunaṭṭam*. l. 5: “by his grace,” *aruḷ*. l. 7: *kāṭu malinta*. l. 8: “sing her ten hymns and dance,” *taṇ pāṭal pattum pāṭi(y) āṭa*; *taṇ* is a possessive that can be rendered by “hers,” “his,” or “its.” l. 9: “ills,” *pāvam*; “destroyed,” *nācam*.

Appendix 2

Cēkkiḷār's biography of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in translation¹

1. This is holy Kāraikkāl, a famous town where a close-knit community of successful merchants lives, well-known for its flawless honesty and great virtue. Their great prosperity is from the sea, which rises in close waves that undulate like the curve of conch shells before breaking on the beach.²
2. At Kāraikkāl, the sea is full of ships. Taṇatattāṇ, the head of the community of seafaring merchants who flourish there, secured by his practice of austerities the birth of a daughter, Puṇitavati,³ who was of such great beauty that she was reputed to be an embodiment of Lakṣmī.⁴
3. Her birth graced and enhanced the community of merchants. With time she gently grew, taking her first faltering steps, and learning to speak so that she could express the love that overflowed in her heart without end and become a servant to the feet of the Lord who is adorned with the cobra.⁵
4. She grew up amidst great affection, properly attaining all the stages of childhood to the enjoyment of her many great relatives and with the comforts of prosperity provided by her wealthy father. They all thought of her as a blossom of increasing beauty and love for the Lord who rides the bull.⁶
5. As she played the games of young girls, the nurse who cared for her encouraged her to do things related to the glory of the Lord of the gods whose matted locks are crowned by the crescent moon, such as paying homage to his servants. Soon she approached puberty, her waist giving way under the weight of her breasts.⁷
6. Her beauty increased, full of the features that are described as desirable in traditional books; because of its magnificence, there came a time when she should not leave the home, and traditional merchant families compatible with her own began to inquire about a marriage alliance.
7. One inquiry was that made on behalf of the son of a renowned merchant named Nitipati, who hailed from the famous seaside town of Nākai, and, as per custom, her parents agreed to permit them to come to the prosperous and populous town of Kāraikkāl to speak about their splendidly ornamented daughter.⁸

8. The family elders came and entered the house where they wished to make the marriage and addressed the patriarch Taṇatattāṇ: "We request that you permit a marriage alliance in the proper manner according to established custom between Paramatattāṇ, who is the son of Nitipati, and your daughter, who is as beautiful as new gold."⁹
9. When Nitipati heard that her relatives had granted their permission for the traditional marriage, he was overjoyed in the manner of one who received a high honor. He and his prosperous relations celebrated the distinction of their daughter-to-be, and they began to make preparations for the wedding.
10. They sent out wedding invitations; as the auspicious day approached, they completed all preparations. They beautifully adorned the groom with jewels and a garland of flowers, and entered Kāraikkāl greeted by the sound of celebratory drums.¹⁰
11. They entered the home of Taṇatattāṇ, who wore a garland of the sweetest flowers.¹¹ They fixed the order of the rites according to the prescriptions of the learned books, and with the blessings of all of their happy relatives, they married the smiling peacock of the bud-like feet [Pūṇitavati] to the young bull adorned with a fresh flower garland [Paramatattāṇ].
12. In the days that followed the completion of the marriage ceremonies, because she was their only daughter, Taṇatattāṇ constructed a beautiful home nearby so that they would settle there and she would not go with her husband to Nāakai of the rolling sea.
13. In addition to the tremendous wealth that her father happily bestowed on his married daughter, the son of the very wealthy Nitipati increased substantially the abundance of the household where they lived together, greatly in love.¹²
14. There, the lady with hair like a flower settled into the caring activities of domestic life and flawlessly maintained the household with unceasing discipline and ever-increasing love for the sacred feet of the Lord who rides the great bull.¹³
15. Whenever faithful servants to the Lord would arrive, she would give them excellent food and then, out of her love for them, she would provide them with all of the things they might desire, including red gold, the nine gems, and expensive cloth. Daily her meditation on the feet of the Lord of the gods increased.¹⁴
16. Some people came and gave two mangos to Paramatattāṇ, who was leading a disciplined life. He accepted the fruit, gave the people whatever they required, and asked them to bring the fruit to his home.¹⁵
17. The lady whose hair bears fragrant flowers received the two ripe fruits sent by her husband and kept them aside. Then, a holy servant of the Lord who is adorned with the cobra came to the house because he was very hungry.¹⁶
18. Seeing the state of the true devotee of the Lord who revealed the Vedas, she resolved, "I will alleviate the hunger of this servant to the Lord." She gave him water so he could wash his feet, and then she prepared a special plate with tender boiled rice as a pure repast.¹⁷

19. The lady who is like the goddess who sits atop the beautiful lotus had prepared the rice, but the curry was not yet ready. She thought, "Since this precious guest is a servant to the Lord who rides the bull then there is no greater honor than this," and she strongly desired to give him a proper meal.¹⁸
20. She took one of the two ripe mangos that she put aside as her husband had instructed, and hastened to prepare it. With gladness she offered the meal to the servant in order to end his discomfort.¹⁹
21. The holy servant, who was tired because of the weakness of old age and the pangs of acute hunger, happily ate the tasty rice with mango. Then, pleased with his treatment by the lady whose soft hair is decorated with flowers, he departed.²⁰
22. After he departed, the merchant who is the master of the house returned to his mansion at noon. He bathed to refresh himself, then relished his meal while his modest wife served him dutifully.²¹
23. After she served the rice and curry course, the lady with the fragrant hair who is like a swan retrieved the remaining ripe mango that her wealthy husband had told her to keep in the house, and she served it to him.
24. The merchant enjoyed the perfectly ripe fruit his wife had served, but he was not contented with just that sweet taste, so he enjoined her, "bring me the other one that is just like this sweet fruit," and she went aside as though to do so.
25. She swooned there, feeling faint with worry about that precious fruit, and she thought of the feet of the Lord who rides the bull. The Lord comes as succor at the mere thought of distress, and by his grace a ripe fruit appeared in the hand of the lady who has long hair.²²
26. She happily brought and served it to her husband. As he ate, its flavor became very sweet, even sweeter than nectar, and he asked the lady who wore many bangles: "This other mango is not like the one you gave me first; it is rare in the three worlds to obtain this taste. Where did you get it?"
27. The sheltered lady heard his words but did not answer. She thought that there were essentially no words to describe the greatness of the grace that is bestowed by the Lord who is the source of grace; yet she also thought that according to the way of traditional modesty it was not proper not to obey the words of her husband, and so she could not avoid answering. She stood, hesitating.²³
28. The principled lady considered it her duty to describe the manner in which it occurred and, meditating on the coral colored feet of the Lord of the blackened neck, the sheltered lady who had fragrant hair described it to her husband, who had asked, "Who gave this fruit to you?"²⁴
29. The master of the house heard about the grace of the Lord but did not believe it. He looked directly at the she who is like the goddess who sits on the fragrant lotus and said, "Alright, if you got this by the grace of the Lord who has lustrous matted locks, ask him again for a sublime fruit by his grace, and give it to me."²⁵
30. The wife moved to the side and prayed to the Lord who wears a cobra as ornament, "If you do not grant this by your grace now, my words will be

false,” and she obtained a mango by his grace. Her husband was completely astonished as she came to put it in his hand.

31. As soon as the mango touched the merchant's palm it disappeared. He was seized by a fear that would not abate, and his mind became perplexed. Thinking that she was a local deity, he resolved to leave without telling anyone; for the time being he lived without much interaction with her.²⁶
32. His mind was made up, and he acted accordingly. Announcing that “I will go out on a boat on the roaring sea to make a fortune,” he got many merchants of unblemished fame in his family and community to make him a wooden boat.
33. They built the boat, and stocked it with provisions required for the places he would go, along with the necessary crew. He prayed to the god of the wind and, on an auspicious day, the captain set out on the wavy sea.
34. The ship sailed over the sea, and he reached his desired destination and made a large fortune there. After a few days he departed and again would alight in another place; in this manner he reached a seaside town in Kaṇṇi Nāṭu, where the waves lap the shore.²⁷
35. He took up residence in that town and proceeded in that same manner to amass a great fortune that could buy anything. In that town illuminated by fame he married with great pomp a moral young lady whose merchant father had given his approval.
36. After marrying the precious lady who is like Lakṣmī he lived happily, stable in propriety without scandal by concealing in his mind without expressing to others his prior separation from the lady who is like a local goddess with fragrant, black flowing tresses.²⁸
37. The man who was famous for commanding ships on the high seas, who had acquired wealth like the lord of riches himself, and who was chief among the merchants in the ancient town surrounded by fragrant groves, obtained with his wife a precious daughter who was like a lamp unto their home.
38. In the course of performing auspicious ceremonies for his infant daughter, he thought long and hard about his former wife, whom he had left from fear of living with her and, considering her a deity sacred to the family, he dutifully gave his beloved daughter her name.²⁹
39. While he was living there in that manner, the daughter of Taṇatattaṇ, whose wealth was beyond compare among the merchants of Kāraikkāl, where the buildings are surrounded by imperishable walls, steadfastly and faithfully preserved a virtuous domesticity.³⁰
40. The relatives of the lady who is like a vine of brilliant gems heard that Paramatattaṇ, who went on a ship to increase his fortune, had settled and was living on a treasure without limit in a great town in the renowned Pāṇṭi Nāṭu.
41. The moment they heard the news the relatives of the local goddess-like lady sent one of their members there. On hearing a report of his status, they became worried, and they decided to bring the lady of the rounded breasts to the place where he was living.³¹
42. Her beloved relatives lifted the lady of the gait like a peacock into a jeweled palanquin, thinking that she resembled Lakṣmī herself sitting on her lotus

- throne. They lowered the attractive curtain and set off with loving relatives and sweet-voiced companions for the long distance.³²
43. After a few days' journey they reached the sacred land of pure Tamil.³³ They approached the great town where Paramatattan̄ of the garland of fame resides and sent some ahead to tell the husband who possessed wealth without limit that they had brought his first wife.
44. As soon as he heard the words of those who came, the merchant's mind filled with fear. He said, "I will come before her accompanied by the braceleted lady I married later and the daughter that she bore," and he proceeded toward the lady of the thick hair.
45. With his wife and his toddler daughter he paid homage to the feet of his first wife, who stood like a young doe; he said, "I wish to live by your grace; because of this my very young daughter bears your name," and prostrated himself before her.³⁴
46. Seeing the husband worship her, the lady who was like a vine in bloom and the relatives surrounding her stood dumbfounded; some came to their senses, felt ashamed, and demanded: "Why are you of the fragrant garland worshipping your wife?"
47. Then he responded to them: "When I realized that this lady was no longer human – that she had become a good and great goddess – I left, and gave my infant daughter her name. I worshiped her golden feet and you also must honor her."³⁵
48. As soon as he spoke, the relatives stood exclaiming, "What is this?" But when the lady of the fragrant hair heard the words of the merchant she meditated on the ankleted feet of the Lord whose matted locks bear the *konrai* flower; achieving great knowledge through her singular focus, she proceeded to speak.³⁶
49. Worshipping the feet of the highest Lord she said: "I request that you remove this sack of flesh that bears my beauty only for the sake of this man here who has spoken thus. Instead, give to me, your servant, the form of the ghouls who venerate your sacred feet in that place."³⁷
50. At that moment, by the grace of the Lord who dances in the hall she fully realized the spiritual path and obtained what she desired: She shed all of her beauty that her fleshly body possessed and became a body of bones in the form of a ghoul that is venerated by all on heaven and earth.³⁸
51. Flowers rained down everywhere and the sound of a heavenly drum reverberated throughout the world; the celestials and sages rejoiced; celestial groups broke into dance; but her many relations, who stood right beside her, made reverential gestures and then departed in fear.
52. Then, united with the divine wisdom that had arisen within her, she gracefully composed the "Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder" in praise of the Lord who has Umai, which she lovingly sang, thinking, "I have truly become one of the fine group that praises his beautiful red lotus-like feet!"³⁹
53. Brimming with profound insight, she next composed and sang the beautiful "Double Garland of Linked Verses." She obtained the magnificent grace to

- approach the majestic silvery mountain of Kailai, where the Lord who burned the triple citadels in days of yore resides, before setting out on her difficult pilgrimage.⁴⁰
54. Those who saw her were amazed and frightened, and ran from her presence. Hearing them remark on the nature of her appearance, she responded: "If the leader of the gods recognizes me, why should I explain this form to the throngs of people who are ignorant of the truth?"⁴¹
55. In a flash she traveled across the northern region, and arrived at the luminous Kailai mountain, which is favored by the Lord who holds the trident and wears a garland of fresh blossoms. There, she eschewed the hindrance of her legs and proceeded to walk with her head upon the ground.⁴²
56. She proceeded on her head; brimming with love and joy she ascended the silvery mountain where Caṅkaraṇ resides. There, she was noticed by the vine of Himālaya, the smooth-browed female half of the Lord who has the third eye and is adorned by the bright crescent moon.⁴³
57. Ampikai, whose heart was both amazed and moved, asked her great Lord: "What is this kind of love, oh Lord, possessed by the body of bones that ascends here by means of its head?" And the Lord gracefully responded to our great Lady.⁴⁴
58. He replied, "The lady who approaches cherishes us like a mother, oh Umai; she obtained this exalted form just as she desired." Then, looking at the one who came near he called out "Mother!" and that excellent word resounded throughout the world.⁴⁵
59. The Lord graciously called her "Mother," and she lovingly bowed to his golden lotus-like feet and replied, "Father," then stood. The Lord who is adorned with white shells tenderly gazed at her and asked, "What do you desire from our part?" She bowed down and spoke.⁴⁶
60. She replied, "May those who desire you with undying joyful love not be reborn; if I am born again, may I never forget you; may I sit at your feet, happily singing while you, virtue itself, dance."⁴⁷
61. The Lord who is attained by those who worship him gave her his grace and said: "You will see our dance and you will experience bliss, forever singing to us, in resplendent Ālaṅkāṭu, an ancient town that is both renowned and fertile that lies in the brilliant southern region."⁴⁸
62. After the mother received that gracious gift, she worshiped the Lord who is the truth and meaning of the excellent Vedas and took her permitted leave of him. By her great love for his precious reply, she set out on her head for that excellent place known as famous Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, and then reached it.
63. At Ālaṅkāṭu, when she witnessed the beauty of his dancing with a straightness that touches the heavens, she sang the initial good verses to the Lord who is without beginning, starting with *koṅkai tiraṅki*. She praised forever the dance that is revered and loved by those on earth.⁴⁹
64. Great love and desire rose and rose in her as she bowed before the sacred dance of the Lord who is adorned with honeyed koṅṇai blossoms, and she was full of admiration. She sang about the beautiful Lord's dance of graceful movements

in time with the drumbeat in sacred verses beginning with *eṭṭi*, *ilavam*, and *mīkai*.⁵⁰

65. To offer adequate praise to the renowned one on whom the Lord whose locks hold the river bestowed the tender name “mother,” the one who obtained the grace that he gave, and who sits at the coral-hued feet of the Lord who gracefully performs the luminous *tāṇṭava* dance – who would be talented enough for that?⁵¹

Notes

Preface and acknowledgments

- 1 I stopped research reading for this book project at about that time (mid-2009). For example, I have not consulted a book on this female saint that appeared recently, Elaine Craddock's *Śiva's Demon Devotee* (Albany: SUNY Press, May 2010). Since her book appeared after I had completed my manuscript, and well after I had stopped researching, her book has had no influence whatsoever on my research, arguments, formulations, or translations in my book. In addition to this there were several factors that have served to preclude my consideration of her book, of which I shall mention two. One is that Craddock's 2007 article, which I cite in this book, mentions in a footnote my first book on the development of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* over the seventh–fourteenth centuries (*The Embodiment of Bhakti*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), but mischaracterizes its content for the purpose of the author's dismissing my first book as irrelevant to her own study of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti*. Also in 2007, I submitted a very detailed proposal of my book to a US national grant agency just prior to the publication of Craddock's article. Much later that year, at my request I received an edited version of the discussion about my proposal that took place among the specialist committee members who judged it. I learned that there was a member of the committee who was very invested in Craddock's work who spoke against my proposal. Suffice it to say that my professional ethics, given this scholar's investment in Craddock's work, would mandate that this scholar recuse herself from the committee discussion and not handle my written proposal at all.

1 Gestures of interpretation

- 1 Prentiss (1999, 17–24).
- 2 Accessible translations of these saints' poetry include: for Mīrābāī, Hawley and Juergensmeyer (1988); for Mahādevīyakka, Ramanujan (1985 [1973]); for Āṇṭāl, Venkatesan (2010).
- 3 The *Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature* also identifies four canonical authors, whose works are found in the eleventh volume, as being part of the nine groups of servants designated as saints (authors Nakkīratēvar, Kallāṭatēvar, Kapilatēvar and Paraṇatēvar) (Samuel 1990, 295). See the list of Śiva-*bhakti* canonical authors and their works in Cutler (1987, 4–5) (the author Tirumūlar should have been starred as included among the sixty-three saints; his story is number 36 in the *Periya Purāṇam* hagiographical text).
- 4 The text is also known as the *Tiruttonṭar Purāṇam* or “Great Traditional Story of the Holy Servants.”
- 5 On the *Periya Purāṇam* and its fit with the genre of epic, see Samuel (1990, 82–83, 323–24). See also the introduction to a new and accessible translation of the entire text into English: McGlashan (2006, 8–9).

Her experimentation with *kaṭṭalaikkalitturai* and *viruttam* [in “Garland” and “Decades”] might probably have been the result of her realization of the constraints of *veṇpā* [in “Wonder” and “Garland”] in the composition of devotional poetry. These *tuṛai* and *viruttam* along with *tāḷicai* come under *pāviṇam*. Related to the four main metrical forms of the preceding age as they were, they became the dominant metres of the Pallava period as also of the subsequent ages. It may be said that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār’s contribution to the form of the Tamil poetry is significant earning for her the status of a great poetess.

(Samuel 1990, 79)

For Tamil literary terms see Murugan (2000); on Tamil prosody see Niklas (1988, 165–227), and also Rajam (1992).

- 7 I use the term “biography” throughout this book to represent Cēkkiḷār’s representation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār’s life story, instead of the specialized language of “hagiography,” in keeping with my perspective on locating the study of religion within the humanities, as explained later in this chapter.
- 8 Cutler (1987, 48, 55 n. 25).
- 9 Critical discussions of the tendency of commentators to allegorize the poetry are in Cutler (1987, 93–110), and Hopkins (2002, 41–3); see also Monius’s discussion of commentary that creates community (2001, 141–55).
- 10 I have spoken to many people about their exposure to the story of the saint in school textbooks, though I have not pursued this as a study. The film, which is commercial in nature though of course emphasizes the saint’s devotion, is *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār*, directed by Nagarajan and starring Sundarambal (1973).
- 11 Smith (1982, 36–52).
- 12 Lincoln (2000, 420); Fisher (1998, 23).
- 13 Gadamer (1997 [1960], 224).
- 14 N. Shukla-Bhatt has recently offered an intriguing analysis of the multiplicity of languages represented in Mīrābāī’s songs as “translation”; the presence of phrases from Hindi, Rajasthani, and Gujarati even in a single song represents a “footprint” by the devotional communities:

When a bhajan becomes popular through such communal performances, it is integrated by a community into its own bhakti culture. The process is something like what happens when a family opens a gift that has arrived from a friend and finds a place for it in its home. Such translation is about creating—perhaps recreating—a religious/cultural meaning that can be incorporated into one’s own cultural milieu.

(Shukla-Bhatt 2007, 277)

- 15 For an overview of the history of scholarship on interpretation, see Cruz (2005, 1137–42).
- 16 See Davidson (1989, 164).
- 17 Discussed by Godlove (2002, 12–14); quotation from 14. See also the articles by Stout, Rorty, and Proudfoot in the same volume.
- 18 Penner (2002, 169). See also Penner (2000, 57–71).
- 19 Penner (2000, 68).
- 20

Thus, in a domain such as folk genetics we find the same mixture of occasionally evoked counter-intuitive elements and normally un-expressed intuitive assumptions as we find in what is, loosely and conventionally, called religion. The contrast between simpler beliefs and more reflexive beliefs which might be counter-intuitive is thus

arked, not by the intrinsic character of the subject matter, whether genetics, ancestors, dragons or *sampy*, but by how it is treated and presented in certain discourses.

(Bloch 2002, 146)

- 21 Smith (2004, 366–67, 369, 371; quotation on 372). Smith discusses aspects of the distinctive ideals of the Enlightenment and the counter-Enlightenment as contributing sources for the two understandings of religion, and he stresses the relevance of modern linguistic theory.
- 22 Prentiss (1999). My study took as a point of departure K. Sharma's book-length thesis that the scholarly definition of *bhakti* as "devotion to a personal god" leaves out *nirguna* ("non-attribute") portrayals of God by saint-poets who could meaningfully be included in the category of *bhakti* (Sharma 1987). I was already familiar with this kind of definitional argument of omission from Penner and Yonan (1972, 107–33). The majority of my book analyzed how overlapping, historically inflected discourses of *bhakti* were created in medieval south India, primarily through the *episteme* of embodiment.
- 23 Two excellent resources for comparative study of female authors are Tharu and Lalita (1991); and Young (1993).
- 24 Bynum (1987).
- 25 Tharu and Lalita (1991, 65). Earlier literature authored by women may include the Vedas, in which female poets such as Ghosā, Apālā, and Lopamudrā appear. However, Witzel (2009) has recently questioned whether these women are authors of the Vedas, or women who are represented as speaking in the Vedas and who later on that basis had those verses attributed to them as authors. For a discussion of pre-*bhakti* Hindu texts that feature female protagonists, undertaken with the aim to chronicle a discourse that made the emergence of female gurus possible in the sixteenth century and later, see Pechilis (2004, 3–49).
- 26 Translated by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy in Tharu and Lalita (1991, 69).
- 27 On Mahādēviyakka see Ramanujan (1985 [1973], 111–42). On Mīrābāī, see Hawley and Juergensmeyer (1988, 119–40); Mukta (1994); Martin (1996, 7–46); Shukla-Bhatt (2007, 273–98).
- 28 Narayanan (1999, 25–77; p. 39). Examples of male poets adopting a female voice are Māṇikkavācakar (ninth century), Nammālvār (seventh to early eighth centuries), and Surdas (sixteenth century); on the former see Cutler (1987); on the latter see Hawley and Juergensmeyer (1988, 91–116).
- 29 Tharu and Lalita (1991, 70–7).
- 30 Translations include Ramanujan (1967); Ramanujan (1985); Kailasapathy (1968); Shanmugam Pillai and Ludden (1976); Hart (1979); Hart and Heifetz (1999); Selby (2000).
- 31 Samuel (1990, 149).
- 32 Ramanujan (1985, 137 and 183), respectively. There is a website where information about Auvaiyār and translations of her poetry have been collected at <http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/auvaiyar.html>, part of a larger project on "Other Women's Voices: Translations of women's writing before 1700." Site address: home.infionline.net/~ddisse, maintained by Dorothy Disse (accessed October 2011).
- 33 Cutler (1987, 142, 150–60).
- 34 The hymn is in the seventh book of the canon, *Tēvāram* 7, verse 39. For a translation of this hymn see Shulman (1990, 239–48); Marr (1979, 268–89, esp. 271–3). For a discussion of list and canon in the making of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* see Prentiss (1999, 110–13).
- 35 F. Gros's Postface in Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, works of (1982 [1956], 95–114, esp. 98 and n. 8). Zvelebil (1975, 152, 155).
- 36 In the text they are called *mūttanar patikam* ("first verses," v. 63) and *tiruppatikan* (v. 64), in order to distinguish the two decades.

- 37 I am mindful of Rita M. Gross's critique of historical studies of women as the search for "great women" in a sort of "compensatory history" because male actors were prioritized, nearly to women's exclusion, in most extant historical sources. However, I agree with her assessment that:

The [historical] record is the record and cannot be changed by feminist dreams. But the record *as selected and interpreted* by both insiders and outsiders is quite another matter. The task of the feminist historian vis-à-vis the history of a religious traditions is best summed up, in my view, as the quest for a record that is both *accurate* and *usable*

specifically, discerning the attitudes towards women that the record promotes (Gross 1999, 78–109). In the article on Hinduism in the volume, Vasudha Narayanan provides an important critical discussion of specific women in that tradition, both historical and contemporary, who opened up creative spaces for women's self-expression (Narayanan 1999, 25–77).

- 38 Those who put her date definitely prior to 700, and most likely at 550 CE, are Filliozat (in *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ*, works of 1982 [1956], 8, 13) and Kāṛavelāṇe (in *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ*, works of 1982 [1956], p. 19, citing K. A. Nilakanta Sastri); Cutler (1987, 118); and Dehejia (1988, 135). I have already discussed the evidence pointing towards the existence of a classical female author named "Kāraikkārpēy." Let me note here that I agree with François Gros (in *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ*, works of 1982 [1956], 95–114, esp. 97–8) that it is problematic to assume that certain *Tēvāram* hymns refer to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ; more likely they refer to the goddess or to a folklore character named Nīli, whom I will discuss later. I translated one of the hymns by Campantar (1.45.1/481) and noted its possible reference to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ and to Nīli in Prentiss (1999, 176), text and note to poem 6.14. However, Kāṛavelāṇe's suggestion that Cēkkiḷār's portrayal of Campantar's reluctance to enter Tiruvālaṅkāṭu because "Kāraikkāl came walking on her head" serves as evidence of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ's pre-dating Campantar is anachronistic ("Avant-propos" in *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ*, works of 1982 [1956], 18).
- 39 Murugan (2000).
- 40 Pollock (2006, 283–329, 380–97).
- 41 Quotation is from Pollock (2004, 390).
- 42 Monius (2001, 128–33) discusses such an equivalence in the eleventh-century *Vīracōḷiyam* grammar.
- 43 The quotation is from Samuel (1990, 76). Many of these ethical works were authored by Jains and Buddhists; eleven of the poems grouped in the collection named *Kīḷkkaṇakku* are didactic in nature (Samuel 1990, 234). A wonderful resource for the scholarly examination of 100 years of translating *Tirukkuraḷ* is Manavalan (forthcoming). Manavalan's book speaks to the important issue of determining when a translation is either too general or too detailed to be effective.
- 44 This form of *veṇpā* is called *nēricaiveṇpā* or *irukuraṇēricaiveṇpā*, as explained in *kārikai* 23 of Amitacākarar's late tenth–early eleventh-century *Yāpparunīkalakkārikai* and commentary (this is a later version of the related text, the *Yāpparunīkalam*, that cites Kāraikkārpēy, as discussed earlier); see Niklas (1993, 153–61). In printed editions of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ's poetry, the characteristic dash offsets the ornament, so that the fourth foot is separated from the rest of the line. The ornament is a literary structure and the offset word is not necessarily a dominant element in terms of the meaning of the poem.
- 45 Samuel (1990, 321–3 and 297).
- 46 In this connection, note that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ's hymns on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu observe the pattern that the first decade of stanzas each end in the name, "Tiru Ālaṅkāṭu," and the majority of stanzas in the second decade end in *āṭumē* ("dances"). There is also

another classical interpretation of *antāti*: In the Aṅkuranūru collection of 500 poems contained in the Caṅkam “Eight Anthologies” (*Eṭṭuttokai*), there is an example of all ten verses having the same beginning phrase. The widespread use and significance of “ten” in Tamil literature is discussed by Zvelebil (1973, 50 n. 1); he notes that the number appears in the arrangement of some Caṅkam poems, in ethical literature such as the *Tirukkural*, and in the decades of *bhakti* poetry, and he suggests that it may be derived from Sanskrit *śataka* arrangements.

47 Respectively, *appan iṭan tiru ālaṅkāṭē* and *āṭumē*; see previous note.

48 Samuel (1990, 348).

49 These figures, shrouded in legend, may have been contemporaneous or 100 years later than Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. On their poetry: “Formally, the three *antāti* poems attributed to Poykai, Pūtam, and Pēy, the first three *ālṃvārs*, are nearly identical to Kāraikkālammaiṃyār’s poem.” On their names:

Explanations for the *ālṃvārs*’ names are also given [by tradition]: the first *ālṃvār* was called Poykai because he was born in a pond (*poykai*); the second *ālṃvār* was called Pūtam (Sanskrit: *bhūta*) because he was in communion with the most essential plane of being (according to this interpretation, the name is derived from Sanskrit *bhū*, ‘to be, to exist’); and the third *ālṃvār* was called Pēy (ghost) because he was so consumed by his devotion for Viṣṇu that he behaved like a man possessed by a spirit. (Since Sanskrit *bhūta* is actually a close synonym for Tamil *pēy*, Pūtam probably also acquired his name because he was ‘god-possessed’.)

(Cutler 1987, 175 and 122)

It is also the case that there was a Caṅkam poet named Pēyaṅṇār (Filliozat in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, works of (1982 [1956], 13)).

50 Samuel (1990, 79); see note 6.

51 Samuel (1990, 76, 79 and 148).

52 François Gros’s “Postface” in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, works of (1982 [1956], 103, also 114). This study by scholars at the Institut Français d’Indologie in Pondichéry relies on published editions of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s works (see the “Note Bibliographique,” 115–16), as does my study. I did, however, find two manuscripts of her work at the Government Oriental Manuscript Library located at Madras University, both including only her *Arputat Tiruvantāti* (“Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder”; catalogued as *Kāraikkālammaiṃyāntāti*). One of them (TD581 D1185) is on palm leaf, and is grouped with a variety of Tamil Śaiva texts ranging from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. The other (D1194) is handwritten on paper in a hardbound writing tablet that includes another text. The descriptive catalogue notes the appearance of the former as “old” and that it is missing several folios (4, 5–8), while the latter appears as “new”; Kuppaswami Sastri (1927).

53 The quotations are from Cutler (1987, 22). The translation is my own, from the *Arputat Tiruvantāti* (“Wonder”) v. 1.

54 Cutler (1987, 27). My translation of *Arputat Tiruvantāti* (“Wonder”) v. 33.

55 Cutler (1987, 51).

56 See the discussion in Penner (2000, 60, 66, 69).

57 Penner (2000, 66–7).

58 Kripal (2001). His first book was *Kālī’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1998).

59 Haraway (1991, 193), cited in Kripal (2001, 324); Dilthey (1990, 103, italics in original), cited in Kripal (2001, 325); Gadamer (1997 [1960], 224), cited in Kripal (2001, 326). Discussion of Habermas in Kripal (2001, 326).

60 Kripal (2001, 327).

- 61 J. Kripal, “On the Democratic Constitution of the Soul: Or When the Brain Becomes a Filter,” delivered as the 2009 Halstead Lecture at Drew University on March 25, 2009.
- 62 Kripal (2001, 66).
- 63 Penner (2000, 68).

2 The poet’s voice

- 1 Pope (1900).
- 2 The scholarly literature on the nature of translation is voluminous. Discussions of translation that have been helpful to me include: Ramanujan (1981); Parthasarathy (1993); Selby (2000); Damrosch (2003); Damrosch (2009).
- 3 See n. 52 in [Chapter 1](#).
- 4 Ramanujan (1981, xv and n. 8). His collection includes eighty-three poems, seventy-six from the *Tiruvāymoli* (out of a total of 1,102 poems) and seven love poems in the classical style from the *Tiruviruttam*.
- 5 Sivaramamurti (1984, 182). He is drawing on the fifth canto of Kālidāsa’s *Kumārasambhava*; for a translation of this canto see Miller (1984, 223–39). Miller says that “. . . Śiva’s meaning is nowhere else in Kālidāsa’s poetry explored in the sustained way that it is in the eight verse cycles of the *Kumārasambhava*” (1984, 235); for a translation of the full text, see Heifetz (1990). This scene between Pārvaṭī and Śiva, with its theme of a woman renouncing her beauty to signify her devotion to Śiva, could have informed Cēkkaḷār’s biography of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār.

3 The poet’s vision

- 1 I am discussing the creation of a narrative within each work. Her biographer sets on a related but distinctive task by creating a narrative that locates her works in relation to one another, “Wonder” and “Garland” to her two “Decades.” The classical Caṅkam *akam* (‘interior’) poetry, which as I discuss was prior to and influential on Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, also dealt with individual scenes in stanzas and was only later (ca. eighth century) developed into cumulative themes across stanzas:

Prior to Nakkīraṇār’s *Commentary* on the *Study of Stolen Love*, love poems dealt with individual scenes, like little, condensed crystals of reality drawn from the lives of lovers. *Tolkāppiyam* laid down conventions for constructing ‘snapshots’ of love life, and may well embody an earlier tradition of serialized continuity. But it was Nakkīraṇār who, in the present detailed commentary, first ordered those poetic moments unmistakably into a serialized plot . . . What had begun in the beautiful, succinct poetry of the Caṅkam age blossomed in a plethora of literary forms that developed in succeeding centuries.

(Buck and Paramasivam 1997, xiv)

- 2 Cutler (1987, 22–7).
- 3 Cutler (1987, 27). The translation of the verse is my own.
- 4 I put the following verses in this category (neither speaker nor addressee is specified in the poem): “Wonder” vv. 13, 17, 20, 21, 26, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 48, 49, 50, 52, 53, 55, 58, 60, 62, 64, 65, 67, 68, 74, 75, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 84; “Garland” vv. 2, 8, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18; “Decades-1” vv. 1–10; “Decades-2” vv. 1–10.
- 5 Cutler (1987, 27).
- 6 My phrase is a modified version of Svetlana Boym’s concept of “off-modern” (2001, xvi–xvii) that is cited and discussed in Ramaswamy (2004, 16).

- 7 I would place the following poems in this category (“the poet speaks to her own heart”), “Garland” vv. 1, 4, 6, 12, 13, 20.
- 8 They are set to the *intalam paṇ* in the traditional tunes of ancient Tamil music (this *paṇ* is similar to the Carnatic *rāga* named *neḷitapañjami*). For a translation and discussion of the traditional story that describes the setting of Śiva-*bhakti* poems to music, see Prentiss (2001, 1–44).
- 9 Gros in Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, works of (1982 [1956], 103, see also 114).
- 10 Cutler (1987, 22). I would place the following verses in this category: “Wonder” vv. 1, 27, 36, 41, 42, 51, 54, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 66, 70, 71, 72, 88, 89, 90, 94, 95, 97, 98, 99, 100; “Garland” vv. 5, 7, 14, 15.
- 11 This view of the feet has ancient roots and modern expressions. In the Vedas of circa 1500 BCE there is a famous hymn, the Puruṣa Sūkta (“Hymn of Man”), that equates occupations with parts of the body, and the servants are represented by the feet. In society today, if one’s foot accidentally touches someone else’s, one apologizes with a gesture of humility (touching the fingers to the head as though “taking the dust” from the other’s feet); and when seated, it is considered very rude to point one’s feet in someone’s direction.
- 12 The term is *aṭi* (“foot”); Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār uses the term *aṭiyaṇ* (“one who serves,” “Wonder” v. 44) and *aṭimai* (“service,” “Wonder” v. 69), in her poetry.
- 13 She uses the term “servant” only in the “Wonder,” e.g., vv. 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 23, 31, 40, 44, 61, 91 (“service” see vv. 3, 69, 72, 78, 79); in the “Garland” she refers to loving service, e.g. vv. 16, 19.
- 14 On love and memory in classical Sanskrit texts, see Malamoud (1996, 247–58).
- 15 In scholarship on Western medieval female mystics, L. Finke made an early argument about the communal, rather than personal, nature of women’s mysticism (1993, 28–44).
- 16 Cutler (1987, 25).
- 17 The poet addresses the audience using forms of “you” in “Wonder” vv. 22, 45, 46, 78, 91; “Garland” vv. 3, 9.
- 18 The poet refers to “I” in “Wonder” vv. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 18, 24, 28, 44, 59, 61, 72, 73, 85, 88, 92, 99.
- 19 The poet “speaks to her own heart” in “Wonder” vv. 16, 31, 40, 47, 73, 93; “Garland” vv. 1, 4, 6, 12, 13, 20.
- 20 The earliest translator of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s complete works into English, the esteemed scholar T. N. Ramachandran (1993), translates one verse that has what is understood today to be “we” into “I”: “Garland” v. 19. In one verse, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār uses both “we” and “my” (*emakku* and *eṇ*, “Wonder” v. 2).
- 21 The exception is “Wonder” v. 86. Note also that I translate “Wonder” v. 14 using the first person although the subject is not specified.
- 22 In this category, “the poet speaks to an unspecified addressee,” I would place “Wonder” vv. 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 18, 19, 24, 28, 44, 76, 85, 86, 92; “Garland” v. 17.
- 23 I would place the following poems in the category “the poet speaks to the audience” using forms of “we:” “Wonder” vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 23, 25, 43, 69, 81, 87, 91, 96; “Garland” v. 19.
- 24 Srinivasan (1979, 15–32).
- 25 Willis (2009). His detailed discussion of the Gupta development of worship engages epigraphy, literature, and architecture.
- 26 This rivalry, with emphasis on detailing the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, is discussed by Hudson and Case (2008).
- 27 Heitzman (1997, 217).
- 28 Ali (2004, 104).
- 29 Ali (2004, 104).
- 30 Ali (2004, 105).

- 31 As suggested by Dimmitt and van Buitenen (1978, 6–11). Recent overviews of the *purāṇas* are Matchett (2005), and Narayana Rao (2004). Sources for the study of *purāṇa* stories of Śiva include O’Flaherty (1973); Dimmitt and van Buitenen (1978); Kramrisch (1992 [1981]); Meister (1984); Collins (1988); Benton (2006). For Tamil tellings of these stories, see Dorai Rangaswami (1990 [1958]); Smith (1996).
- 32 A point emphasized by Matchett (2005) How early the ethos of *bhakti* framed the much-redacted stories is an open question.
- 33 Champakalakshmi (1981, 8–12). Dorai Rangaswamy (1990 [1958], 262–404) provides discussion of the presence of these *purāṇic* images in Tamil Caṅkam and early post-Caṅkam literature (e.g., *Purāṇānūru*, *Maṇimēkalai*, and *Cilappatikāram*), as well as discussion of their presence in local myths of Tamil towns and places in his commentary on each of Śiva’s heroic images.
- 34 On mythology and the hymns of poet-saints Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar, see Peterson (1989), and Prentiss (1999). On mythology and the hymns of Māṇikkavācakar, see Cutler (1995).
- 35 Hopkins (2002, 9). Holdrege (2008) says of the development of the “devotional body” of God that

... newly emerging conceptions of divine embodiment in *bhakti* traditions . . . interject two new emphases in their discursive reframing of the body. First the divine body is given precedence as the most important in the hierarchy of integral bodies and is represented in a standardized repertoire of particularized forms of the deity who is revered as the object of devotion – whether Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, or Devī (the Goddess). Second, the devotional body emerges as the processual body of central significance, which is to be cultivated as a means of appropriating, engaging, experiencing, and embodying the divinity.

- 36 According to David Smith (1996, 17, 186, 242 n. 16), the Tamil *Tirumantiram* by Tirumūlar (which was made the tenth book of the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* canon in late medieval times) is the first to mention the Eight Heroic Deeds of Śiva. If the *Tirumantiram* is to be dated to the sixth century, as advocated by Samuel (1990, 296) and Zvelebil (1975, 138), then this tradition was crystallizing in Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s own time; however, other scholars date the text later, ca. eighth to tenth centuries: for example, Smith (1996, 17, 186, 242 n. 16). Ghose (2004, 123, 127 n. 8) has recently argued for a pre-eighth-century date.

The poet uses four images of Śiva that are within the group of his Eight Heroic Deeds: Śiva who Destroyed the Triple Cities (Tripurāntaka-Mūrti); Śiva who Slays the Elephant Demon (Gajāsura-Saṁhāra-Mūrti); Śiva burns Kāma, the god of love (Kāmāri-Mūrti) and Śiva who Saves Mārkaṇḍeya from Death (Kāla-Saṁhāra-Mūrti; *Kāla* is “Death”). Four other Heroic Deeds in the set are not represented in her poetry (Śiva Slays Andhaka; Śiva Destroys Dakṣa’s Sacrifice; Śiva Severs one of Brahmā’s Heads; Śiva Slays Jalandharāsura).

The mythological references the poet makes to feats performed by Śiva that are *not* included in the Eight Heroic Deeds are: Śiva bearing the Poison; Śiva bearing the Gaṅga; Śiva becoming the Column of Light; Śiva crushing Rāvaṇa; and, in one verse, Śiva appearing before Arjuna (“Wonder,” v. 62; an episode from the *Mahābhārata*).

- 37 The *liṅga* (Sanskrit; in Tamil, *liṅkam*) is the aniconic column that is an embodiment of Śiva for the purposes of worship, especially in temples; the term means “sign.” There are many myths about the *liṅga*’s origins and power.
- 38 Since late medieval times, the hymns of the three famous male saints have been a locus of interest of the philosophical school, the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta, which developed philosophical interpretations of the hymns (see Prentiss (1996) and Prentiss (1999)). Recently Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s work has been analyzed in these philosophical terms

(Pāskar 2006). I am not following a specific school of philosophical interpretation in my remarks, though I am mindful of connections with the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta.

- 39 In this connection, it is worth noting a similarity between the kinds of questions asked by Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār and those posed by the grand later philosopher Ādi Śaṅkara (ca. 788–820 CE) in the *Śivānandalaharī* hymn attributed to him, for example v. 32:

O my lord Śambhu of noblest spirit! Please let me know how you looked at the deadly poison, fearful in its shooting flames, driving terror into the hearts of all celestials; how could you even hold it in your hand? Did you take it to be a ripe blue Jambu fruit? Placed on your tongue, did you mean it to be a bliss-conferring medicinal tablet? Or as you held it on your neck, did you consider it a magnificent blue sapphire?

(Sivaramamurti 1984, 186)

Compare, for example, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's "Wonder," vv. 88 and 98.

- 40 The theme of the rivalry between the goddess (Daughter of the Mountain) who shares half of the Lord's body and the Gaṅga who resides in his hair is also described in *Tiru Iraṭṭai Maṇimālai*, "Garland," v. 5. The commentator to the Tarumai Āṭṭam edition, Tiru. Ci. Aruṇai Vaṭivēlu Mutaliyār (Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, works of (1995a, 22)) explains that this "Garland" verse is a "condemn prayer" (*nintāt tui*). This genre is found in both Sanskrit and Tamil Caṅkam literature (some of the best examples are poems about the Tamil ruler Pāri); the poem seems to condemn or insult the subject, but it actually praises the subject. See more at notes to the poems in [Appendix I](#).
- 41 On the date of the earliest iconographic representations of this form of Śiva, see Goldberg (2008, 302).
- 42 Malamoud (1996, 256–7).
- 43 The Aṣṭamūrti concept is found in Kālidāsa's poetry and Sanskrit mythological texts (*purāṇas*), and there are variations on it. See Miller (1984, 223–4, 238); also Kramrisch (1992, 108–11). Sivaramamurti (1974, 25, 31) discusses later interpretations of Śiva as Lord of the Dance (Naṭarāja) as a visual embodiment of the Aṣṭamūrti.
- 44 See Kramrisch (1992, 438–42); Gaston (1982, 47–8, 133–9, 144–8, 152–69, 175–6); Collins (1988, 53–7).
- 45 Natarajan (1991, 419–31). This volume includes the Tamil text.
- 46 On this distinction of yoga/devotion between the two authors claimed by Tamil Śiva-bhakti as saints, see Younger (1995, 192–201, esp. 200).
- 47 *Liṅga Purāṇa* 106.2–28 in Dimmitt and van Buitenen (1978, 200–1).
- 48 *Kūrma Purāṇa* 2.5.1–11, 22–27, 40–42 in Dimmitt and van Buitenen (1978, 202–3). On the contrast between the dance in the *Liṅga* and *Kūrma purāṇas* see also Collins (1988, 54–5).
- 49 On the fearsomeness of Śiva's ornaments, see O'Flaherty (1973, 238–52) (section on "Transformation of Śiva's Ornaments"). See also the theme of Śiva's supposed unattractiveness in Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*, which I briefly discuss in [Chapter 2](#).
- 50 In this verse ("Wonder" v. 29) she could also be suggesting that the outsiders are not even seeing Śiva at all, for the ghouls (*pēy*) are described in all other of her poems in which they appear as Śiva's adoring entourage, not as the Lord himself.
- 51

Without beauty, savorlessness and boredom triumph; dominated by the beautiful sex alone, social intercourse is "equally boring," and even disgusting. Contemporary aesthetic theory provides, precisely, an exit between these poles of savorless absence and disgusting presence of the beautiful. The aporia's solution involves an imperative of *mandatory supplementation*: in order to be and remain beautiful, the beautiful has an innate need for completion through something other than it—through something non- or not-only beautiful.

(Menninghaus 2003, 27)

- 52 O’Flaherty (1982, 140–1) discusses Sanskrit and Tamil versions of the myth, distinguishing the two on the latter’s non-erotic portrayal of the dance. On Tamil versions of the story, see also Handelman and Shulman (2004, esp. 1–44).
- 53 Cutler (1987, 122).
- 54 In Tamil, *pēy* can also refer to the menacing spirit of a deceased person, which is also a meaning of *bhūta* and of course has resonances with the cremation ground setting. For present-day ethnographies exploring this meaning of *pēy* in Tamilnadu, see Kapadia (2000); and Clark-Decès (2008).
- 55 Excerpt from *Purāṇānūru* 359, “Kāvittaṇār sings Antuvaṅkīraṇ” (Hart and Heifetz 1999, 203. The connection between Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* and classical Caṅkam poetry has frequently been noted (e.g., Ramanujan and Cutler 1983; Cutler 1987, esp. 66–73).
- 56 Specified as *pēyp peṇṭir* and discussed in their translation of another verse (*Pur.* 62), Hart and Heifetz 1999, 263 n. 62.2. In other Caṅkam and post-Caṅkam literature the phrase used is *pēy makaḷir*, translated by R. Mahalakshmi (2000, 25) and V. Ramaswamy (1997, 129) as “demonesses,” but the term *makaḷ* refers to human beings – specifically, daughters and by extension women – composed of a female plural ending on the root *maka*, “child.” I argued previously for using the term “ghoul” instead of other terms such as “ghost” and “goblin” (Pechilis 2006b, 175). I have subsequently noticed that Paula Richman (1988, 200 n. 12) also translated *pēy* as “ghoul,” and rendered *aṇaṅku* “as demoness in this context because the term refers to a malevolent being.”
- 57 Sasivalli (1984); Mahalakshmi (2000).
- 58 Kramrisch (1992, 299) discusses this under the heading “Bhairava: The Supreme Beggar” and characterizes the cremation ground by repulsion, disgust, and holiness: “Revulsion in its last degree of sublimation reaches up to holiness.”
- 59 *Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, A Shaiva Saint*, dated to the eleventh century, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, <http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionData/base.cfm?id=17654&theme=sseasia> (accessed October 2011). I discuss bronze images of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in Chapter 5.
- 60 There is a description of a female ghoul from the post-Caṅkam poem, the *Tirumukkarṇruppaṭai* (“A Guide to Lord Murugaṇ”), but this poem is either contemporaneous with Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār (ca. 500–600 CE), or even later (ca. 700–800 CE according to Zvelebil (1973, 27 n. 3)). The poem is in 312 *akaval* verses and is attributed to Nakkīraṇ, who Zvelebil says lived later than a Caṅkam poet by the same name (1973, 27 n. 3); one of its verses describes in detail a female ghoul (*pēymakaḷ*) who is on the battlefield dancing the *tuṇaṅkai* dance (translated by Zvelebil 1973, 126):

dry-haired,
twisting and projecting teeth
in her gaping mouth,
rolling eye-balls,
greenish eyes
with a fearful gaze,
ears that pain her heavy breasts
as the owl with bulging eyes
and the cruel snake
hang down from her ears
bothering her breasts.
In her hands with shining bangles
she holds a black skull,
smelling rotten.
With her cruel, sharp-nailed fingers

stirring blood
 she had dug-out human eyeballs
 and eaten them up.
 As she dances, shoulders heaving,
 her mouth drips with fat.

This verse is cited and discussed in Mahalakshmi (2000, 26), probably anachronistically, as she suggests that Kāraikkāl Ammaiār “alludes” to this description (p. 27).

- 61 The subject, however, is not specified in the verse.
 62 For example, “Garland” v. 15, “Decade-2” v. 6. Notably, the verb “sing” (*pāṭu*) also describes the actions of the dwarfs who constitute Śiva’s retinue (*kūḷi*; “Decade-2” v. 1) and animals at the cremation ground (“Decade 1” v. 11), as well as those who would sing Kāraikkāl Ammaiār’s hymns (“Decade-2” v. 11); it is not used to describe the poet-saint, who is represented as speaking (“Wonder” v. 101; in “Decade-1” v. 11 a partridge sings but the saint says).
 63 Translating the phrase in question (“Wonder” v. 86), *pēyāya narkañattil onrāya nām* as “we have become as one with the good band of ghouls” does not resolve the ambiguity.
 64 There is a revealing detail here in that a later text associates *pēy* with poet, albeit derogatorily. In discussing terms that designate poets in Caṅkam poetry, Zvelebil (1973, p. 14) notes the following:

... the term which is used most frequently is *pāṇar*: This is connected with *pāṇ* “song, melody” ... The *pāṇar* were minstrels who sang their songs to the accompaniment of the *yāl* or lute. In medieval times, they were regarded as a lower caste, and in such medieval texts as the *Nantikkalampakam* (anonymous, of the time of Pallava Nandivarman III, 846–69; historically, a reliable text) the *pāṇar* are compared with *pēy*, “the devils, the demons”, and with *nāy*, “the dogs”.

- 65 Kristeva (1982, 4).
 66 The poet consistently uses *kāṭu* (wild, uncultivated, uninhabited land), a contrast term to *nāṭu* (cultivated land, city, political unit).
 67 Kristeva (1982, 12–14). Menninghaus (2003, 365–401).
 68 As is assumed by Dhaky (1984) in his review of the *bhūtas* in early Sanskrit mythological literature, especially the *Mahābhārata* and the *Matsya Purāṇa*.
 69 The date of the *Tolkāppiyam* is disputed; I follow the majority in assuming a pre-Caṅkam or Caṅkam-era date, viewing the text as foundational to, more than redactive of, the poetry. Quotations are taken from Murugan (2000, 413, 417).
 70 Richman (1988, 53–78).
 71 Richman (1988, 97).
 72 Intriguingly, there is a town called Tiruvālaṅkāṭu in the Tanjore area, near Kumbakonam, but there is no remembered connection between this Śiva temple and Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, as I found when I spoke with a young man named Mohan at the temple, now many years ago: He insisted that the saint was only connected with the town by that name in North Arcot, some sixty kilometers from Chennai towards Arakkōṇam.
 73 Mahalakshmi (2000, 20). See also Shulman (1980, 194–223).
 74 Mahalakshmi (2000, 29). On the nature of this goddess see Subbarayalu (2001, 11–14); Raman (2001); Srinivasan (1992).
 75 Parthasarathy (1993, 121–2) (in Canto 12, “The Song and Dance of the Hunters”). For a recent discussion of *Murukan* and *Koravai* in Tamil Caṅkam poetry see Dubianski (2000, 16–34). Dubianski also notes that a poem in the *Puranānūru* collection distinguishes one king from the others by describing him in Śaivite terms as:

[possessing] the third eye, glittering in the forehead crowned with the fair moon of the One who has a magnificent royal head and a black throat, who set free the mighty celestial dwellers when he destroyed three citadels with one arrow, taking a high mountain for a bow and a serpent for a bow-string.

(poem 55, l. 1–5, *Ritual and Mythological Sources*, p. 4)

Kor̥ravai is discussed by Subbarayalu (2001) and Srinivasan (1992).

76 Mahalakshmi (2000, 26).

77 Mahalakshmi (2000, 33–7). She relies on Shulman (1980, esp. 194–5 and 216–18); he uses a version of the *Tiruvālikāṭṭuppurāṇam* from 1864. These stories are also popularly printed in a book available at the temple, Capāpati Tēcīkar (2004).

78 Unraveling the evolution of this story would constitute a study in itself; let me offer some complicating factors here. The mention of a story of Nīli in the fifth-century epic *Cilappatikāram* does not link it to Tiruvālaṅkāṭu or its neighboring village of Paḷaiyanūr. The brief story in that epic portrays Nīli as a righteous woman who, as she commits suicide by jumping off a cliff, curses the man who falsely accused and killed her husband; this incident is offered by the text as a karmic explanation of its hero Kōvalaṇ's fate, since he was the man who falsely accused Nīli's husband in a former life (Parthasarathy (1993, 204–5) in Canto 23 “The Explanation”). In theory, then, Nīli could have been viewed as a righteous heroine as a parallel to the epic's Kaṇṇaki, but then Nīli's curse destroyed Kaṇṇaki's husband, and Nīli kills herself in contrast to Kaṇṇaki's transformation to a goddess.

As the story of Nīli developed in Tamil literary history, she became synonymous with the negative characteristic of vengeance. The eighth-century *Tēvāram* hymns of Cuntarar on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu (vv. 530–9, see the translation in Shulman (1990, 326–32)) do not at all refer to Nīli, and an earlier hymn by Campantar (1.45.1/481), on Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, ambiguously refers to “a woman who deceived her husband previously” (see the translation in Prentiss (1999, 176, text and note to poem 6.14)). This ambiguity is erased in Peterson's translation (1989, 203), which renders a description that can only apply to Nīli.

V. Ramaswamy, who briefly tries to explain the evolution of the story, notes that the heroine of the Jain epic, the *Nīlakēci*, is characterized in the epic as having been “... *Neeli Pey* meaning a cunning female demoness, before her conversion to Jainism and her emergence as its votary” (1997, 97). Towards its beginning, the *Nīlakēci* (“Nīli the Debater”) identifies Nīli as a leader of goblins and ghouls devoted to the great goddess, and she hails from the “southern direction” (v. 44). She is summoned by the goddess to the cremation ground on the outskirts of the north Indian town of Pāṇchāladesa, where she challenges a Jain teacher who has forbidden sacrifice at a temple to the goddess; although she adopts both fearful and beautiful guises to persuade him, she herself becomes converted to Jainism and subsequently travels across north India to debate leading teachers of Buddhism, including the Buddha himself. The associations of ghouls, cremation ground, and goddess do resonate with the Nīli story as it is known today in Tamilnadu, though editor Chakravarti oversteps in his use of present-day texts to positively identify the characters as Nīli from Paḷaiyanūr and Kāḷi of the text; however his mention of nearby Kanchipuram as a center of Jainism in support of his identification is intriguing, as is his mention of Nīli in another Jain text, the *Ratnakarandaka Śrāvākāchāra* (Chakravarti (1936, 11–20). The *Nīlakēci* is variously dated, from the sixth to the ninth centuries; recently Anne Monius has suggested a ninth-century date (2001, 163 n. 31). References to the story in Cēkkiḷār's twelfth-century *Periya Purāṇam* locate it at Paḷaiyanūr-Tiruvālaṅkāṭu, but are ambiguous, not mentioning Nīli at all but instead focusing on the honor of the town's citizens (e.g., vv. 1080, 1606, 2908; two other verses locate Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṛ at the place, vv. 2905 and 3436; see McGlashan (2006, 106, 149, 249, 288). In the fourteenth-century story of

- the life of hagiographer Cēkkiḷār, the *Cēkkiḷār Purāṇam*, Nīli is identified as a woman who resides in Paḷaiyanūr whose deception caused virtuous deaths (v. 15; cited in *Tamil Lexicon* as the earliest instance of the equation between Nīli and female *pēy*).
- 79 Verse 2733, under “Dance of Beauty”; translation by Natarajan (1991, 421); Tamil text is included in the volume.
- 80 See the chart in Ramanujan (1985, 242).
- 81 Younger (1995, 84).
- 82 Padma Kaimal (1999, 394 and 415 n. 14) provides a list.
- 83 Zvelebil (1998, 12, italics in the original). As Paul Younger notes (1995, 88), Zvelebil’s insistence on the southern Indian origin of the story of the Lord as Dancer is an argument against C. Sivaramamurti’s earlier discussion of a northern Indian origin of the story; he references Sivaramamurti (1974). For a critical overview of the development of the image of the Dancing Śiva (Naṭarāja) see Kaimal (1999).
- 84 Other examples of this pattern would be Islam’s tracing of its genealogy to Ishmael, and Kūkai’s claim to have recovered the *Lotus Sutra* in his development of esoteric Buddhism. This principle also applies to both poet Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s and author Cāṭṭaṇār’s (author of *Māṇimēkalai*) use of the cremation ground; as P. Richman notes, the *pālai* landscape “lies at the edge of the *akam* world” (1988, 71).
- 85 P. Younger notes that legends of the goddess are at “the earliest level of the temple tradition” of Chidambaram (1995, 90, 118 n. 15, at which he references Shulman (1980, 211–23)).
- 86 For versions of this story in English, see M. Wood on a modern telling by a senior priest at Tiruvāṇkāṭu (2004, 108); see D. Shulman on a version from a mid-nineteenth-century temple legend, *Tiruvāṇkāṭṭupurāṇam*; a version from Chidambaram found in a modern Tamil secondary work; and one told to him by a priest at Chidambaram (1980, 214–16, 218–20).
- 87 Smith (1996, 143–6).
- 88 Tirumūlar states that Śiva dances with Kālī and in the Golden Hall, and in the Temple. He may be locating all of the elements at Chidambaram (note that “demons” is a translation of Tamil *kūḷi*, or “goblins,” part of Śiva’s host): “He dances with Kali;/He dances in the Golden Hall;/He dances with Demons;/He dances in the world;/He dances in water, fire, wind and sky/ He dances in the Temple Holy day after day/He, the Lord Supreme” (Verse 2.746; Natarajan 1991, 423). But note that this verse is under a section on the “Golden Hall Dance,” which is distinctive from the next section on “Golden Tillai Dance,” with the latter seemingly a clear reference to Chidambaram.
- 89 On these points see the discussion in Monius (2001, 3–12).
- 90 Srinivasan (1979, 15–28).
- 91 Zvelebil (1998, 13).
- 92 Zvelebil (1998, 16).
- 93 Kaimal (1999, 394 and 415 n. 14); see also the image on p. 395.
- 94 Kaimal (1999, 405). She is specifically discussing the Cholas, a later dynasty, but I believe it applies to the Pallavas as well.
- 95 Zvelebil (1998, 12).
- 96 Zvelebil (1998, 23).
- 97 On the latter see Prentiss (1999, 95).
- 98 Tirumūlar, for example, notes that Śiva’s wife Umā witnesses the “Beauty Dance,” which is distinctive from the “Golden Hall” dance in which Kālī and the “demons” participate (vv. 2732, 2746 in Natarajan 1991, 421, 423). Thus, when Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār asks whether the ghouls or the goddess witness his dance (“Wonder” v. 99), she is not “mocking” the goddess (Mahalakshmi 2000, 31), but perhaps instead referring to two different types of dance. On the relationship between Kālī, Pārvaṭī, and Śiva as dancer in early mythology on Kālī, see Kinsley (1997, 70–5).

- 99 Shaw (1994, 24). On early associations among Kālī, the cremation ground and Tantra see Kinsley (1997, 75–91); for later traditions see Dold (2003). On Tantric Hinduism and practices at the cremation ground, see Biernacki (2007).

4 The biographer's view

- 1 The story of Cēkkiḷār is told in at least two texts. One is the one hundred and three-verse *Tiruttoṇṭar Purāṇa Varalāru* ("History of the Story of the Holy Saints"), also known as *Cēkkiḷār Purāṇam*, attributed to Umāpati Civācāryār in the fourteenth century. This story is included in some editions of the *Tiruttoṇṭar Purāṇam*; I have consulted *Tiruttoṇṭar Purāṇam* (1988, 575–91). Another is a poem within the genre of *piḷḷaittamiḷ*, or "Tamil for a child," a form of poetry since the twelfth century in which the poet adopts the voice of a mother and addresses praise to an extraordinary child. T. C. Miṇāṭcicuntaram Piḷḷai of the nineteenth century (1815–1876) imagined Cēkkiḷār to be such a "child," and offered praise to him in his *Cēkkiḷār piḷḷaittamiḷ* (Richman 1997, 112–29). These texts have their own perspectives in rendering his life, which deserves a study of its own; my focus is Cēkkiḷār's interpretation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. I have previously investigated Umāpati Civācāryār's special interest in the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* saints (Prentiss 1996; Prentiss 1999, 134–52 and 157–209; and Prentiss 2001, 1–44).
- 2 I base this statement on my discussions with a variety of people. This includes schoolchildren, who have told me that the story of the saint is studied in the second, fifth, and seventh standards (grades) of school, with only brief excerpts from her poetry. It also includes professional singers of the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* hymns. The poet-saint's two hymns (the "Decades") are set to tunes in traditional Tamil music, but they are not performed, according to a senior award-winning professional singer of devotional hymns, Dharmapuram P. Swaminathan (personal interview and discussion, January 1997). He knew the music for one of her hymns and kindly taught it to me. I have heard many lectures on the *Periya Purāṇam* and three on the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār (one by Dr. Vai Ratnasabapathy at the Śiva temple in Tiruvāḷankāṭu on April 8, 1993; one by Dr. Visvanatha Civacariyar at the Śiva temple in Mylapore, Chennai on March 29, 1997; and one by Dr. N. Jayalakshmi at a small Śiva temple in northern Chennai on March 24, 2003; each emphasized her story from the epic). Lastly, I am drawing on my conversations with a wide variety of Tamil people whom I have asked about this in my years of research on this and related topics, including pilgrims at temples where there are festivals devoted to the saint.
- 3 I found about a dozen Tamil language volumes on the life and works of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, published in Chennai during the 1930s and 1940s, at the Roja Muthiah Research Library in Chennai during visits there in spring, 2003.
- 4 In Sanskrit, the *Śivabhaktavilāsam*, said to have been recited by Śrī Sūta Mahāmuni, who recounted the sage Upamanyu's narration of the saints' lives as previously told by the legendary sage Agastya. Upamanyu is also mentioned as a source in the *Periya Purāṇam*; Cēkkiḷār claims that his expansion of the saints' stories from two earlier sources is based on Upamanyu's oral telling of their stories. The text is said to have been a favorite of the famous twentieth-century guru, Śrī Ramaṇa Mahārishi, and has been recently translated by one of his devotees, L. Rao (2002; story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār at 192–9). For a discussion of the legendary Upamanyu see Smith (1996, 41, 43). Shantha (1997) compares the Tamil *Periya Purāṇam* with sources in the Kannada language. An abbreviated version of her story is also told in a later Tamil text by the philosopher Umāpati Civācāryār (fourteenth century), reproduced and discussed in Cūriyamūrtti (2003, 14–15).

- 5 *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṣār* (1973), directed by A. P. Nagarajan and starring K. B. Sundarambal in the title role. The songs in the movie are new compositions, not the saint's hymns.
- 6 I discuss Tamil images of the saint in [Chapter 5](#). Her images are found in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Cambodia, as discussed in Dehejia (1988, 136–7). Vasudha Narayanan kindly shared with me her photos of images of *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṣār* from a stone lintel on the temple at Bantey Srei in Cambodia (ca. 967) depicting her at the feet of the Dancing Śiva, and a similar scene in another lintel at Battambang Museum in Phnom Penh (September 2010).
- 7 The former is Cuntarar's "Tiruttonṭattokai" verse (*Tēvāram* 7.39) of the eighth century and the latter is Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi's *Tiruttonṭar Tiruvantāti* of the tenth century; I discuss these two texts in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume. For further discussion of Cēkkiḷār's drawing on the earlier Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* texts in the making of saints, see Prentiss (1999, 108–12) and Pechilis (2006b). For brief but illuminating discussions of Cēkkiḷār's complete text as an "epic" and the fact that it uses chapter headings from Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi's text, see McGlashan (2006, 7–13).
- 8 Most commentators on the poems remark on this connection.
- 9 At some point, her two "Decades" became set to music; "Decade-1" to the Naṭṭapātai *paṇ* and "Decade-2" to the Intaḷam *paṇ*.
- 10 Campantar 1.45.1/481; see n. 78 to [Chapter 3](#).
- 11 All of the cited translations are from McGlashan (2006, 106, 149, 249, 288). All modern commentaries mention Nīli in their discussions of these passages.
- 12 It is interesting to note that in one T. C. Mīṇāṭcicuntaram Piḷḷai's verses of his *Cēkkiḷār piḷḷaitamiḷ* in praise of Cēkkiḷār as a "child," he specifically refers to Nīli (verse 57), though in keeping with Cēkkiḷār's perspective he emphasizes the actions of the virtuous townsmen. Also mentioned is the Dancing Śiva in the nearby forest (Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭu). In P. Richman's translation:

Before the illustrious assembly of Paḷaiyanūr,
 known for its unchanging goodness,
 stood a merchant, trembling
 because he had seen terrifying Nīli.
 The seventy Veḷḷālas of the assembly vowed,
 "If death strikes this good man who lives on earth,
 we will all bathe in the fire and forsake our lives.
 Understand this."
 They bathed in a pit of seven tongues of flame
 and, living up to their word, won great victory.
 Those seventy people attained the flower feet of the Lord
 who dances in the forest to the north of the village.
 Born of their lineage, O Cloud,
 showering the rain of precious grace,
 come, come.
 King of Kuṇṇattūr,
 where palatial buildings vie with mountains,
 come, come.

(Richman 1997, 126)

- 13 Younger (1995, 103–4). There is a shrine within the main complex of the temple that features a silver image of Śiva performing the *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* dance.
- 14 *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṣār's Tiruvāḷaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam* ("Decade-1" v. 1) has *koṭṭa mūḷavan kaḷi pāṭak kuḷakan āṭumē* ("beat-drum-goblins-sing-beautiful one-dances");

Cēkkiḷār's text ("Story" v. 64) has *koṭṭa muḷavan kuḷakan āṭum enap pāṭinār* ("beat-drum-beautiful one-dancing-about-she sang").

- 15 One of the most significant archeological artifacts is the famous copper plates of Tiruvāṇkāṭu, thirty-one sheets that record gifts that the Chola king Rajendra I (r. 1012–44; son of Rājārāja I) made to the temple and to local brahmins who tended the temple (written in Tamil), as well as enumerating an extensive genealogy of the Chola dynasty (written in Sanskrit). One of the verses refers to the Lord of the temple, Śiva, as "Ammaiyappa" or "Motherfather," thought to be a reference to the exchange between Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār and Śiva as depicted by Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi in his brief biography of the saint in the tenth century. The text of these plates are available online at: http://www.whatisindia.com/inscriptions/south_indian_inscriptions/volume_3/no_205_aditya_ii_karikala.html (accessed October 2011). The inner gateway towers bear inscriptions carved in the stone from Rajendra I, his son and co-ruler Rājadhiraṇa (r. 1018–54), and Kulōttuṅka I (r. 1070–1120). The interior face of the outer wall has an inscription from a ninth-century Pallava ruler, Nripataṅka, which the Cholas copied when they rebuilt it; see Balasubrahmanyam (1979, 31–4) (discussing inscriptions from *Annual Report on Epigraphy*, 1905, nos. 460–61).
- 16 Monius (2004b, 196).
- 17 Monius (2004b, 183, 185).
- 18 Monius (2004b, 183, 185, and 170–8).
- 19 The story of Ciṟuttōṇṭar in the "Great Story" is interpreted by Hart (1980); Shulman (1993); Monius (2004a and b).
- 20 Monius (2004a, 139–52).
- 21 The ninth-century *Civakacintāmaṇi*'s combination of the themes of the cremation ground (where the hero was abandoned at birth) and life in a merchant community (the hero's adopted family) may have informed Cēkkiḷār's separation of the two (and rejection of the former) in his portrayal of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār. For a translation of the text, see Ryan (2006).
- 22 In addition to Śiva's appearance as a fearful beggar in the story of Ciṟuttōṇṭar, the story of Māṇakkañcāra has Śiva appear as a guest at his daughter's wedding ornamented in bones in his hair and across his chest. Śiva demands the daughter's hair so he can use it as his sacred thread, and the father complies by chopping off her hair. Unlike the story of Ciṟuttōṇṭar, this story does not represent her hair as being restored.
- 23 A contemporaneous poet-saint in the Vaiṣṇava tradition, Pēyālvār, also seems to have explored the connection between being a *pēy* and the "othering" of consciousness. See Cutler (1987, 122, 128–30). Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is also linked to another of the early Vaiṣṇava poet-saints, Pūtam, in a medieval commentary, as I discussed in [Chapter 1](#) (Zvelebil 1975, 155 n. 164).
- 24 Later Tamil Śaiva philosophical tradition also endorses this link, e.g., Umāpati Civācāryar (fourteenth century) has this passage in his text, *Tiruvārūṇṭayan* (*The fruit of divine grace*): "Remain without performing any actions up until the nature of a *pēy* arises" (v. 8.7; translated and discussed in Prentiss 1999, 196). There are two other prominent medieval authors who use the concept of *pēy*. I have not had the opportunity to study their works, but at first glance they are quite distinctive. Cayaṅkoṇṭār, a celebrated poet in the Chola court, composed a poem celebrating one of King Kulōttuṅka I's victories (early twelfth century). This poem, as with others in the *paraṇi* genre, draws on Caṅkam *puram* poetry conventions, including scenes on the battlefield in which the goddess Kālī and her host of *pēy* feast on corpses. In a sophisticated discussion, D. Shulman argues that the overall comedic register of the text (especially its final canto, which describes "the demons' gluttonous revel on the battlefield, once the fighting is over") serves to integrate the horror of war into the social polity of the South Indian state, which is in large part defined by war; however, the extent to which this naturalizing is

- achieved by the bodies of “others” – women, *pēy*, Kalinka warriors – needs to be examined; Shulman (1985, 276–92). A translation of the text into English is Thiagarajan and Muthuswamy (2006). The text receives brief description in Zvelebil (1975, 186–7) and Samuel (1990, 87). An author in the later Tamil Siddha tradition, Akappēyccittar, in perhaps the fifteenth century, wrote a poem in ninety stanzas in which the ego is likened to a *pēy* in the mind that must be transformed to reach God-consciousness; see Zvelebil (1975, 242); Samuel (1990, 333).
- 25 *Arputam* is from the Sanskrit, *adbhuta*, which is tied to the list of eight *rasas* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* according to the *Tamil Lexicon* (1924, vol. 1, p. 172). Also, *adbhuta* is used in the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the eleventh chapter. There are differences in aesthetic theory between Sanskrit and Tamil traditions, however. Both Martha Selby (2000, 31–3) and Norman Cutler (1987, 65–70) discuss the Tamil concept of *meyp̄p̄ātu* as a corresponding term to *rasa*, though one with significant dissimilarities, including that Tamil poetics presumes a more direct experience of a performance than that of the connoisseur of Sanskrit theory. In addition, the Tamil concept of *tiṇai* or “context” is more central than *rasa* in Tamil poetry: “Just as *rasa* had become the primary focus of the Sanskrit rhetoricians and commentators, so had *tiṇai* become the chief concern of the Tamil critics” (Selby 2000, 33).
- 26 Fisher (1998). There is a wide literature on “wonder” as a theoretical Western concept, ranging in its history from classical to medieval philosophy (Quinn 2002) to its ties to medieval conquest (Greenblatt 1992) to a mode of historical inquiry (Bynum 1997), to its emotional dimensions (Fuller 2006). On the surface, Fuller’s would seem to be the most relevant to my study, since it deals with emotions and spirituality. However, while I appreciate his emphasis on wonder as a primary human emotion, and wonder as “the experience of contemplating how the various parts relate to a greater (if unobserved) whole” (pp. 8–9), I am less keen on his consistent assertion, which forms a subtext of the book, that wonder constitutes a healthy way of living.
- 27 Fisher (1998, 8). It is the case that several of Fisher’s examples relate to knowledge of the natural physical world, but he does have a chapter on aesthetic appreciation and wonder, so his study is not limited to nature.
- 28 According to Fisher (1998, 21), “Wonder and learning are tied by three things: by suddenness, by the moment of first seeing, and by the visual presence of the whole state or object.” He contrasts the visual with the narrative in his discussion, ultimately concluding that the temporal unfolding of the latter diminishes the confrontational quality that is only possible with the sudden experience of a visual whole.
- 29 Fisher (1998, 33–56).
- 30 Portions of this section of this chapter draw on two previously published articles, Pechilis (2008) and Pechilis (2006b), as well as an article I am writing concurrently, Pechilis (forthcoming).
- 31 Cēkkiḷār’s entire work is in approximately 4,286 stanzas in *viruttam* meter.
- 32 Hollywood (2002, 278).
- 33 Dhand (1995).
- 34 Richman (1988, 118–19). She notes that the text explicitly refers to *Tirukkural* couplet #55, “She who arises worshipping her husband, not worshipping gods, will make great rain fall when she says, ‘Rain!’” (p. 109).
- 35 Richman (1988, 33).
- 36 Word choice in the verses is in part necessitated by the meter. However, it remains intriguing that Cēkkiḷār uses the term *kātal* for “love” at the beginning of the story, when he is describing her love for Śiva (“Story” v. 3); to describe the husband and wife’s love (“Story” v. 13); and in the last verse, again to describe her love of Śiva (“Story” v. 65). In all other verses except one he uses the term *anpu* to describe her love for the Lord (“Story” vv. 4, 56, 57, 60, 62). In the verse after he describes their marital

- love he uses a combination of the two terms to describe her love for Śiva (*anpurukātal*, “Story” v. 14).
- 37 Dhand (1995, 118) discusses the evolution from love of husband in the epic to love of God in *bhakti*.
- 38 Ramaswamy (1997, 130–1).
- 39 Discussed in Pechilis (2008, 26–8), and at the end of this chapter.
- 40 The *Māṇimēkalai* remained in circulation beyond Cēkkiḷār’s time: “In the sixteenth century, the Śaiva poet Civappirakācar called *Māṇimēkalai* an intricate text.” He said: “How can one grasp the intricacy of the text about *Māṇimēkalai*?” (Richman 1988, 143, 145; see also pp. 178–9 n. 1).
- 41 Campantar’s poetry represents Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* as engaged in the religious culture of debates in his time, especially with the Jains at Madurai.
- 42 On the identity of a *bhakta* compared with that of a *sannyāsin*, see Prentiss (1999, 64–6).
- 43 *Tirumaṭantai avatārittāl*, “an incarnation of the sacred lady,” with *tiru* as a reference to Lakṣmī (“Story” v. 2).
- 44 “At that time, she became too beautiful so that she ‘should not leave the home’” (*il ikavāp paruvattil*, “Story” v. 6).
- 45 Rudner (1994) provides a scholarly study of the Nattukottai Chettians; in a more popular vein, the beloved Chennai historian S. Muthiah and his sister M. Meyappan’s book (2000) is a self-published, glamorous coffee-table book about the Nattukottai Chettians, in celebration of their clan. Through Mr. Muthiah’s support I was able to meet with the gracious Mrs. Devaki Muthiah, who is the wife of Dr. A. C. Muthiah, Chairman of the SPIC group of companies, to discuss her Master’s thesis on Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār (April 28, 2003). In 2003 I also met with a daughter of Chettiar family who told me that her family was responsible for (re)establishing the ritual tradition of celebrating the *mukti* (spiritual liberation) of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār at Tiruvāṇkāṭu through their patronage activities in the mid twentieth century; I discuss this meeting more fully in the next chapter.
- 46 The phrase is from Butler (1993, 2–3, 7–8, 12, 15).
- 47 This unusual detail in the text could also be a protective device: It ensures family supervision which serves to convey the preservation of her chastity and purity while her husband is away.
- 48 In the story, Cēkkiḷār uses the terms *tiruttoṇṭar* (“sacred servant”) and *atyār* (“servant”) to denote the Śaiva mendicant who comes to her door; he does not use the term directly to describe Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār herself, though obviously he views her as a devotee to Śiva. The term *nāyaṇār* (“Lord,” “master,” “father”) is used in the *Periya Purāṇam* to refer to Śiva himself, not the human saints; Cēkkiḷār uses the term *tiruttoṇṭar* (“sacred servant”) to make it clear that he is illustrating the saintly status of the people he profiles. Later, the term *nāyaṇār* (pl. *nāyaṇmār*) came to be applied to the saints, in the sense of “leader.”
- 49 A list of proper items for the reception of an honored guest in classical Sanskrit sources is discussed by Jamison (1996, 153–7; the quotation is from 157).
- 50 Jamison (1996, 157); see also her discussion of “the exploited host” (164–9).
- 51 Jamison (1996, 165) notes, “As often women are the actual conduits of the hospitality so blithely offered by their male relatives.” Hospitality is also understood to be the gift of a girl in marriage (Jamison 1996, 255).
- 52 The Tamil word I translate as “sheltered” is *maṭavār*, which can mean one who is “simple,” “ignorant,” or even “stupid”; the *Tamil Lexicon* lists “women” as a first meaning and “fools” as a second. It is a traditional value in the culture for women to be “simple”; in the story, it also functions as an affirmation that the saint’s devotion came innately from within, as opposed to learning externally.

- 53 A similar story, though one in which the wife's reception of a second item directly from God does not create a rupture between husband and wife, is in the biography of Purandaradasa, "the grandfather of Carnatic music": Jackson (1998, 69–78).
- 54 Sunder Rajan (1993, 88).
- 55 On performative speech see Biernacki (2007, 121–6).
- 56 I provide further details on the various Tamil terms used to describe Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār in the text, including *tiru*, Lakṣmī, *anaiṃku*, and *teyvam*, and my reasons for translating them as I do, in Pechilis (2006b, 172–7).
- 57 Hart (1975); Rajam (1986); Burrow (1979); Dubianski (2000).
- 58 The classic discussion of power and its application to wives is Wadley (1980). For a recent discussion of the issues in relation to the famous Goddess Meenakshi in Madurai, see Harman (2000, 33–50).
- 59 Today the mango as an emblem of the honesty of the heart is evoked at a shrine to the elephant god Gaṇeśa at Chidambaram, in which there is a small image of a seated Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār (the shrine is on the left just prior to entering the courtyard of the Chit Sabhā from the eastern entrance). Temple priest Śrī Ganesha Deekshitar reminded me that Gaṇeśa is often depicted holding a ripe mango, relating to a well-known story in which Śiva challenged his sons to circle the universe. The athletic Skanda/Murugan immediately set off on his peacock to circle the universe, but the heavy Gaṇeśa just sat for a little while, then stood up and circumambulated his parents, announcing that they are the universe. Śiva, pronouncing Gaṇeśa the winner of the contest, gifted him with a mango.
- 60 In the *Cilappatikāram*, the hero Kōvalaṇ names his daughter by the courtesan Mātavi after his family deity, the goddess Mānimēkalai, who protected one of his ancestors on a sea journey; see Canto 15 in Parthasarathy (1993, 151).
- 61 McGlashan (2006, 161). I prefer his rendering of this phrase to my own translation, Pechilis (2006b, 183) ("Story" v. 58).
- 62 Narayanan (1999, 41).
- 63 See my comparative discussion of these two saints in Pechilis (2005, 95–107). It is the case that the story of saint Tirumūlar portrays him as changing bodies, but this is not a complete transformation of his own body.
- 64 Male saints include Cīruttoṇṭar, Caṇṭēcurar, Arivāṭṭāyar, Eṇipattāṇ, Kaṇampulla Nampī, Ēyarkōṇ Kalikkāman; female characters include the wife of Kalikkampan, the daughter of Mānakkāṇcāraṇ, and the wife of King Kaḷar̥cīnkaṇ.
- 65 Heyes (2007, 22).
- 66 Spivak (2001, 132).
- 67 Biernacki (2007, 141).
- 68 Leslie (1992); Jamison (1996).
- 69 Especially as donors: Bose (2000); Orr (2000).
- 70 Among many publications, Leslie (1992); Pearson (1996); Pintchman (2007); Pintchman (2005).
- 71 The following discussion draws from Pechilis (2004).
- 72 Gupta (1992).
- 73 Krishnaswamy (1993).
- 74 Bahīṇabāī wrote *abanga* verses:

The *abanga* is an elaborated, regularized form of the popular Marathi *ovi* meter, which is used in the songs women sing as they grind flour or husk grain. An *abanga* has rhymed lines and expresses religious sentiment. The form is associated with the Varkari sect, especially with the saint-poet Tukaram, and flourished between the end of the thirteenth century and the seventeenth century.

(Tharu and Lalita 1991, 107–8)

Seventy-eight of Bahinabai's 473 verses present autobiographical details of her life (*atmanivedana*) (Tharu and Lalita 1991, 108); seven of the verses are on wifely duty (Pechilis 2004, 29). Other verses expound religious themes such as the nature of the true guru (*satguru*), *bhakti*, repentance, sainthood, morality, God's names, the nature of a "true brahman," the sacred place of Pandharpur, and the *bhakta* Pundalik (Pechilis 2004, 27). A brief review in the context of Marathi literature is in Bhagwat (1995).

75 Hancock (1995); Erndl (2007).

76 Irigaray (1985); Finke (1993).

77 Among many, Bynum (1987); Petroff (1994); McAvoy (2004); and the critique by Hollywood (2002, 277–8).

78 Coakley (2006); Mooney (1999); Mooney (1994).

79 Coakley (2006, 9). On male biographers of female practitioners see also Mooney (1999), and Wilson (1996). See also Jantzen's (1995) critique of male interpreters of female mystics, especially male philosophers, theologians, and scholars.

5 A public's vantage

1 Turner (1973).

2 P. Younger's comparative remarks on pilgrimage and festival are intriguing and resonate with mine, though they are in a different key. Younger contrasts the north Indian emphasis on pilgrimage to the south Indian emphasis on festival. A main difference is "the more elaborate social arrangements that are part of the South Indian 'festival,'" that is, festivals "provided one of the most effective forums for social interaction" within a context of localized endogamous caste groups, which resonates with my idea of "home" (2002, 5). See also his remarks on the Aiyappa festival in this regard (2002, 25).

3 Prentiss (1999, 63–5, 68). Cēkḷār, drawing on their poems but creating his own narrative of their lives (with some thematic commonalities with his narrative of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār), suggests that these male saints did not necessarily come to *bhakti* voluntarily themselves: Campantar was a hungry and crying child, Appar was a Jain who came down with a severe stomach pain, and Cuntarar wanted nothing to do with the "madman" Śiva.

4 Appar "Tiruvātirait Tiruppatikam," IV.21, vv. 1, 2, 3, 8. Translated by Peterson (1989, 184–5). She gives other examples of references to festivals on pp. 182–3 and 186–9.

5 The assertion of kinship when there is no biological relationship is also a feature of voluntary association; see Prentiss (1999, 65, 67–8).

6 Novetzke (2008b, 17), citing Warner (2005, 67–124).

7 Novetzke (2008b, 18).

8 Novetzke (2008b, 99–131).

9 Novetzke (2008a, 240).

10 In Hinduism, devotees can ask the saints for succor, although to my knowledge there is not a developed tradition of saints as intercessors such as one finds in other religious traditions.

11 P. Younger identifies these characteristics although in the service of a different argument (2002, 4).

12 Prentiss (1999, 102–9).

13 I have personally seen this image; also, it is described by Wood (2004, 116).

14 Marr (1979). I have personally seen this image; it is described in Marr (1979, 279).

15 On present-day oral performance of Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* hymns as emulation of the saints, and also as a teaching mode, see Pechilis (2006a, 147–63).

16 On this point see Prentiss (2002, 57–70).

17 The inscription is at a temple at Tiruvorriyūr, dated to Rājādhiraḥa, Rājendra's son and co-ruler (r. 1018–54; inscription dated to 1046); see Prentiss (1999, 108, 234 n. 71). R. Nagaswamy also cites other inscriptions:

Festivals in honour of the saints are also recorded in some epigraphs. A festival of bathing the God and the Nayanmars at the mouth of the river Kaveri was arranged to be performed in the temple of Thiruvengkadu, for which lands were gifted (511/1928). At Tirthanagari near Cuddalore, a 12 day festival beginning with the festival of Appar was instituted to be performed annually in the reign of Virapandya, 9th year (121/1904).

(*Śiva Bhakti*, New Delhi: Navrang, 1989, available online at <http://tamilartsacademy.com/books/siva%20bhakti/preface.html> (accessed October 2011); Chapter on “Epigraphical References”)

- 18 I have personally attended this festival several times. Waghorne has a chapter on the neighborhood of Mylapore (2004, 75–128) in which she describes legends, festivals, and the history of the temple.
- 19 Dehejia (1988, 155–81) provides a date for the “saint day” of each saint for the year 1987. The month of each saint day is fixed, but the dates change because they are determined by the movements of the stars and the moon. For example, *Paikuṇi Uttiram* took place on the following dates in the following years: March 18, 2003; April 4, 2004; March 25, 2005; April 11, 2006; April 1, 2007; March 21, 2008; April 8, 2009.
- 20 Temples always have very specific forms of the deities inside. The Tiruvāṇkāṭu temple is a Śiva temple; the *liṅga* (Tamil *liṅkam*) is known as Vaṭaraṇiyeśvara or Lord (*iśvara*) of the forest (*araṇiyam*; Sanskrit *araṇya*) of banyan trees (*vaṭam*); this name is also rendered Āṇkāṭṭēcar or Lord (*īcar*) of the forest (*kāṭu*) of banyan trees (*ālam*). There is a bronze image of the Lord of the Dance (*Naṭarāja*) and a bronze image of the Lord of the Upward Dance (referring to his lifted leg; *Ūrdhvatāṇḍavamūrti*). The goddess at this temple is Pārvaṭī, specifically known as Vaṇṭārkuḷaiammai or the Mother who has Bee-Laden Coiffed Hair (referring to the sweetness of her hair adorned with flowers; *vaṇṭu*, bees; *kuḷali*, lady with coiffed hair; *ammai*, mother).
- 21 My research in spring 2003 was made possible by a Fulbright Senior Research grant. I thank the organization for this support.
- 22 Subramaniam (1996, 178–80, 184, and 188) displays photos of these memorials.
- 23 Subramaniam (1996, xv–xvii). He does not provide a date for this Tamil text.
- 24 The text uses various terms to describe malevolent beings, including *pūtam* (ghost) and *pēy* (ghoul).
- 25 Elements of this story, including the demon nature of the woman and her intention to kill the man, her pretending she is married with child to the man but he abandoned her in the forest, and her appeal to people of the town to believe her side of the story find parallel in a pan-Buddhist story, a Nepali version of which has been translated by Lewis (1995, esp. 161–5).
- 26 Irācavēlu (1997, 96) makes the intriguing suggestion that Nīli could be a member of the host of ghouls described by the poet.
- 27 Shulman, drawing from a nineteenth-century manuscript of the temple origin story (*sthala purāṇa*), provides a telling of the story (1980, 214–18).
- 28 Translation of this Sanskrit and Tamil grant into English, reproduced from *South Indian Inscriptions*, is available online at http://www.whatisindia.com/inscriptions/south_indian_inscriptions/volume_3/no_205_aditya_ii_karikala.html (accessed October 2011).
- 29 K. Pechilis, “Chosen Moments: Rendering the Life of a Classical Hindu Woman Saint,” presented at Columbia University, The University Seminar on South Asia, October 25, 2004. I thank the University Seminar on South Asia for this opportunity.
- 30 Dehejia (2009, 29, 135).
- 31 Both Dehejia (2009, 199–24) and Smith (1996, 161–6) note the importance of the Bhikṣātana image to the three male poet-saints Appar, Campantar, and Cuntarar; Smith says the image is “scarcely less important than Naṭarāja” in their poetry, and notes the connection between the beggar and the dancer (p. 163).

- 32 On proportion in traditional bronze casting see Sivaramamurti (1981 [1963], 18–23). On the aesthetics of sculptural plasticity, see Berkson (2000). Dehejia briefly discusses proportion (2009, 33).
- 33 Dehejia (1988, 50–1) locates the image as borrowed from the established form of the dancing Krishna, but distinguished by its upturned finger.
- 34 Dehejia (1988, 135); see also the many different images of the saint in plates 65–77. There are also multiple images of the saint in Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, works of (1982 [1956], plates 4–12).
- 35 This image is online at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1982.220.11> (accessed October 2011).
- 36 This image is online at the Nelson-Atkins Museum's website: <http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionDatabase.cfm?id=17654&theme=sseasia> (accessed October 2011).
- 37 Dehejia (1988, plate 72).
- 38 Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, works of (1982 [1956], plate 8a); reproduced in McGlashan (2006, 160).
- 39 Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, works of (1982 [1956], plates 4–7).
- 40 I thank both Mrs. S. Manavalan and Mrs. Champa Kumar of Chennai for graciously accompanying me on this visit to the Tiruvālaikāṭu festival, which they did both out of friendship and their own interests in the Tamil Śaiva saints.
- 41 Paul Younger has recently offered an important threefold typology of interpretive responses he received from participants in festivals. Some offered general classificatory terms for how people in the culture think; some sought to explain the festival by remarking on the different social groups participating; and some discussed specific features of the deity being worshiped. These modes could be considered cultural, sociological, and religious in nature. Younger notes:

In later reflection on the three styles of interpretation I was given at the festivals, I realized they were complementary accounts provided by three different types of personalities. The first style was used by a small number who walked around the edge of the crowd and felt uncomfortable with the passion of the festival activity. They felt that it all made sense on an unconscious level, but the abstract truths they tried to find to express that level of truth tended to elude them. Those who used the second style of social analysis did not need to remove themselves completely from the immediate experience of the festival, because their group was there at the festival, but for them too reality was a rationally constructed story of the past that they had been taught. Those who blurted out a near-ecstatic statement about the deity as they went about their worship were expressing their faith with a consciousness hardly distinguishable from the ritual action itself.

(Younger 2002, 6–9; quote from 9)

- 42 For a discussion of the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta school's philosophy of Śiva, see Prentiss (1999, 134–52). These categories are found in Sanskrit Śaiva Siddhānta as well (Davis 1991).
- 43 Chidambaram, unlike the other dance temples, appears in a list of five shrines of sacred manifestations of Śiva according to the five elements: air/wind at Kalahasti (in Andhra Pradesh); water at Tiruvānaikka (near Trichy); fire at Tiruvaṇṇāmalai; earth at Kanchipuram; and space/ether at Chidambaram.
- 44 Shulman (1980, 213), echoed by Wood (2004, esp. 116–17).
- 45 Menon and Schweder (2003) provide an important discussion of current local interpretations of Kālī in Bhubaneswar as compared with an Oriya text and Sanskrit *purāṇas*.

- 46 Kinsley (1997, 67–91) provides an overview of Sanskrit mythologies of Kālī; Brown (1990, 113–22) compares two versions of the Kālī-Śumbha-Niśumbha myth from the *Devī-Māhātmya* and the *Devī-Bhagavāta Purāṇa*, and its erotic overtones. In the nineteenth-century manuscript of the origin story discussed by Shulman, Kālī goes to Tiruvālāṅkāṭu after she battles these demons (1980, 214); this tends to be reproduced in informal histories (Capāpati Tēcikar 2004, 127–39). In current oral representations, such as one by a priest (Wood 2004) and people with whom I spoke, Kālī fought the demons at Tiruvālāṅkāṭu.
- 47 Smith (1996, 146).
- 48 Smith (1996, 143–8) provides a comparison of the *Liṅga Purāṇa* story with the representation of the dance competition in a minor Sanskrit *sthalapurāṇa* of Chidambaram (the *Vyāghrapura Māhātmya*) and a Sanskrit text by Umāpati Cīvācāryār on Chidambaram (*Kuñcitāṅghristava*). He notes that the dance competition is not mentioned in the more prominent *sthalapurāṇas* of Chidambaram in Sanskrit (*Cidambaramāhātmya*) and in Tamil (*Kōyil purāṇam*). He provides a translation of the origin of the Dance of Bliss from the *Cidambaramāhātmya* on pp. 175–85.
- 49 Wood (2004, 108).
- 50 Shulman (1980, 215–16). I have translated the name of the dance according to the *Tamil Lexicon*, p. 2,596 (accessed online October 2011). Cp. “Wonder” v. 77 and “Garland” v. 15.
- 51 *Rahasya* is Sanskrit for “secret.” The temple at Chidambaram is famous for its “secret” formless state of the Lord, “a panel comprising vertical rows of strings of golden vilva leaves studded with precious stones, suspended close to the northern wall of the Chit Sabha” (Natarajan 2004, 55). The secret ruby Naṭarāja is Tiruvālāṅkāṭu’s “secret” formless Lord, a counterpart to the Chidambaram image (the Chidambaram temple also has its own ruby Naṭarāja). Mrs. Devaki Muthiah, wife of Dr. A. C. Muthiah, Chairman of the SPIC group of companies, mentioned Tiruvālāṅkāṭu’s *rahasya* to me in our discussion of her Master’s thesis on Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār (April 28, 2003).
- 52 I met with this sponsor, Mrs. Hemalatha Chandrasekhar, three times during April of 2003; we undertook a formal interview in Chennai, which I taped, on May 1, 2003. Mrs. Chandrasekhar described the role of her grandparents in establishing the two-day festival to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. Her grandmother, Mrs. Caṇṇakavalli, was well known for giving religious discourses; after one such discourse, an elder in the community asked her to initiate celebrations for the saint’s *mukti* (spiritual liberation) day, which she did in 1955. A photo image of her grandmother as a young woman appeared on the festival program of the 2003 celebrations. Her family remains prominent sponsors and organizers of the festival. According to Mrs. Chandrasekhar, her family is Chettiar (the merchant caste that Cēkkillār attributes to Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār), but the devotees who worked with her grandmother to initiate and maintain the festivities were of other identities as well, including Nayakars and Naidus, all united by devotion. Mrs. Chandrasekhar described the entire festival to me in great detail, emphasizing the inclusive nature of the festival across castes and across urbanites and villagers, as well as the amount of effort involved in holding the festival. I thank her for generously sharing her time and knowledge with me.
- 53 This was follow-up research based on my project of spring 2003 to study the life and works of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. My research was supported by a Drew University Faculty Released Time Summer Grant. I thank the university for this support. I was graciously joined for part of the festival by my friend from Chennai, Mrs. Champa Kumar; I thank her for accompanying me and offering her insights about the festival.
- 54 In my experience, historians of religions are very careful about the second issue, and less careful about the first. I have referenced the issue in two of my recent reviews: Tracy Pintchman, *Guests at God’s Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benaras* in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, 1 (February 2007), 273–5, and Jeffrey Snodgrass,

Casting Kings: Bards and Indian Modernity in *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 12, 1 (2008), 99–101.

- 55 Information on this festival can be found at the Karaikal home page <http://www.karaikal.com/karaikalammaiyar.htm> (accessed October 2011), which briefly describes the festival and tells a version of the saint's story. There is an early description of the Kāraikkāl mango festival in Lembezat (1953), in relation to which I offer comparative insights in my telling of the festival. My discussion in this portion of the chapter draws on my previously published article "Experiencing the Mango Festival as the Ritual Dramatization of Hagiography" (2009).
- 56 That a "telling" of a tale has its own formality not captured by viewing it as derivative was a thesis promoted by A. K. Ramanujan in numerous publications (e.g., 1989; 1994). That an ethnography is also a "telling" has been discussed by Van Maanen (1989), and in a companion volume, Emerson *et al.* (1995, esp. Ch. 7). A major scholar whose work presented the possibilities of ethnography as an intensely visual, engaging approach was the late Selva J. Raj, whose work, e.g. (2008), was primarily ethnographic.
- 57 There are strengths to structuralist discussions of ritual in providing an overall view, but they leave out key lived details, such as the performance of regional hymns, as I discussed in my review of Long's article (1982) on Mahāśivarātri in a paper on "The Night of *Tēvāram*" that I delivered at the Conference on Religions of South India at Gainesville, FL, 1998 (published in a revised form as Pechilis 2006a).
The writing of ethnography can be comprehensive, as in P. Lutgendorf's masterful and thorough study of performance of the *Rāmacaritmānas* text (1991); or it can foreground a single personal experience, as in I. Karve's classic article on a pilgrimage procession of the *bhakti* saint Dnyaneshwar (1962). My article, while it foregrounds the performance of a text, as in Lutgendorf's study, is more in the personal experience mode of Karve's essay.
- 58 Anderson *et al.* (2004).
- 59 A map with some of these landmarks is at <http://maps.google.com/> (accessed October 2011) under Karaikal, Pondicherry India.
- 60 Narayan (1996).
- 61 Narayan (1996, 9).
- 62 An image of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in this pose is one of the central images atop a shrine to Kaṇṇaki, the heroine of the Tamil epic, *Cilappatikāram*, at the Canada Sri Ayyappan Temple outside of Toronto. An image of Auvaiyar appears on the shrine as well. Website at <http://www.iyappantemple.com/> (accessed October 2011).
- 63 This shrine was constructed in 1929 by Malaiperumal Pillai, according to <http://karaikal.gov.in/GovtOffices/TOURISM/temp1.htm>, accessed May 2011.
- 64 From the biography:

They sent out wedding invitations; as the auspicious day approached, they completed all preparations. They beautifully decorated the groom with jewels and a garland of flowers and entered Kāraikkāl, led by a band of celebratory drummers [v. 10]; They entered the home of Tanatattan, [Puṇitavati's father] who wore a garland of the sweetest flowers. They fixed the order of the rites according to the prescriptions of the learned books, and with the blessings of all of their relatives, they married the smiling peacock of the bud-like feet [Puṇitavati] to the young bull adorned with a fresh flower garland [Paramatattan] [v. 11];

see the full text in [Appendix 2](#) of this volume.

- 65 Most of the statistics concerning marriage in India online have to do with the increasing divorce rate and the age of women at marriage. An MSN Encarta article on marriage says that 44 percent of Indian women between the ages of 15 and 19 are married (http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761574825_3/marriage.html (accessed

- March 2009)). Marriage is a very popular motif as the culmination of the story in Indian films. Also, note the resonances with the dioramas at Tiruvālaikāṭu.
- 66 S. J. Raj (2008, 90) offers an insightful recent analysis of the system of devotional privileges and ritual honors in south Indian Catholicism, in which: “It is the unholy – yet welcome, necessary, and salutary – alliance between the sacred and secular that provides vitality to the festival tradition at Puliampatti.”
- 67 On the Chettiars, see Rudner (1994) and Muthiah and Meyappan (2000).
- 68 Intriguingly, the biography says that Puṇitavatiyār’s father constructed a home for the newlyweds right near his own home, because she was their only daughter, and so that the couple would not return with her husband to “Nākkai” (widely understood to refer to Nākapattinam/Nagapatnam; v. 12). This detail is in obvious contrast to the tradition of patrilocality; one possibility of its significance is that, when the saint is abandoned by her husband later in the story, she remains under the protective watch of her own family, thereby foreclosing suspicions then and now that are imposed by patriarchy on women’s domestic conditions.
- 69 Smith (1996, 162–3). There are many versions of the story of Bhikṣāṭana in Sanskrit mythology (including the *Kūrma*, *Matysa*, *Śiva*, *Skanda*, and *Vāmana purāṇas*), and in Tamil texts, such as the *Citamparamāhātmya* (Younger 1995, 170), many of them describing Śiva, disguised as a handsome nude male beggar (Bhikṣāṭana), and Viṣṇu, disguised as an enchanting young woman (Mōhinī), deciding to test the sages of the Dārūka forest, who are arrogantly proud of their ascetic feats, and involving explanations of Śiva’s animal ornaments, the worship of his *liṅga*, and connection to his dance. However, D. Smith (1996, 166–77) cautions against locating Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana exclusively in the sages’ forest, emphasizing his wide wandering among villages in India; the image of Śiva in the village is one that Kāraikkāl Ammaiār seems to use in her poetry (e.g., “Wonder” vv. 25, 43, 56, 57).
- 70 This major event in the festival did not receive much attention from an earlier ethnographer, Lembezat (1953, 87).
- 71 When the Lord impersonates a servant, such as in Cēkkilār’s “Story of Cīruttonṭar,” the characters in the story, who do not know it is the Lord in disguise, refer to him as a “devotee” using these terms, but the authorial voice of Cēkkilār does not make such a confusion (in the story, he clearly identifies Śiva in disguise as a mendicant in the Bhairava sect).
- 72 This was demonstrated to me when I gave an invited lecture on Kāraikkāl Ammaiār to Dr. Vasanth’s class at Stella Maris College, a women’s college in Chennai (July 17, 2006): When I asked the students who the “beggar” was, they universally shouted “Śiva!” This interpretation of the beggar also appears in modern commentaries to the biography.
- 73 R. Davis has noted that the poet-saints remarked on this contrast between beggar and kingly adornment (2002, 59–60).
- 74 Fisher (1998, 22–3).
- 75 Fisher (1998, 38–9).
- 76 She made these requests when she encountered Śiva and Umā at Mount Kailāsa: “May those who desire [you] with undying joyful love not be reborn; if I am born again, may I never forget you; may I sit at your feet, happily singing while you, virtue itself, dance” (v. 60).
- 77 Novetzke (2008b, 13–23).
- 78 More (2006, 106–26), specifically discusses the presence of Muslims in Kāraikkāl from colonial times until the present. For other Tamil communities see Mines (2008); Trouillet (2008); Jacobsen (2008).
- 79 Articles include: http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_karaikal-ammaiayr-temple-to-be-renovated_1187395 (on the restoration drive), <http://flashnewstoday.com/index.php/float-festival-at-karaikal-ammaiayr-temple-after-30-yrs/> (“Nazeem expressed hope that

the renovation would place Karaikal Ammaiyar temple in the list of pilgrim centres in India maintained by the Tourism Ministry”), <http://www.zeenews.com/news613066.html> (“Nazeem has taken the lead role in renovating three important temples at Karaikal – Ammaiyar temple, Somanathar temple and Ezhai Mariamman temple. Karaikal Ammaiyar temple Kumbabishekam was held last year. Renovation of other two temples is going on”), <http://news.chennaionline.com/newsitem.aspx?NEWSID=50ebf576-b7e2-4563-92ab-9277d2949912&CATEGORYNAME=CHN> (on the 2009 consecration), <http://www.hindu.com/2009/04/10/stories/2009041055520700.htm> (on the 2009 consecration), <http://www.hindu.com/2010/04/02/stories/2010040251900300.htm> (on the 2010 float festival). All accessed May 2011.

80 Narayan (2004, 244–9).

81 Lembezart (1953, 89).

82 The printed program indicated that this scene would be dramatized between 6:00 and 7:00 that evening.

83 Lambezart (1953, 90).

84 Lambezart (1953, 90).

Appendix 2

- 1 This translation is a revised version of my previously published translation, Pechilis (2006b). The editions used for this translation are: Cēkkiḷār (2000) and Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, works of (1982 [1956]).
- 2 The term used for virtue in the verse is *tarumam*, Skt. *dharma*.
- 3 An important feature of Cēkkiḷār’s text is that he always uses an honorific form to refer to persons, the ending *ār*, as in *Taṇattataṇār* (“he who is lord of wealth”; *taṇatam* is a name for Kubera, the lord of wealth) and *Puṇitavatiyār* (“she who is pure”; *puṇitam*, “pure”), as well as verbal endings that indicate person. He rarely uses the forms *avaṇ* (“he”) or *avaḷ* (“she”), as in *avatarittāl* (“she is an avatar”).
- 4 “An embodiment of Lakṣmī,” *tirumaṭantai avatarittāl*, lit. “an avatar of the holy lady.”
- 5 “Servant,” *aṭimai*; “to the feet,” *kaḷaraku*; “overflowing love,” *perumaṇak kātāl tatumpu*.
- 6 “Love,” *anpu*.
- 7 “Servants,” *tonṭar*.
- 8 “Nītipati,” “lord of treasure.” “Nākai” is understood to refer to the town of Nākappaṭṭiṇam.
- 9 “Your daughter, who is as beautiful as new gold,” *nī payanta paintoṭiyai*, lit. “the green bracelet to whom you gave birth.”
- 10 The invitations were inscribed on palm leaves, *ōlai*. “Drums,” *paṇai muracam*.
- 11 “Garland of the sweetest flowers,” lit. “garland full of bees” (*aḷimiṭaitār*), following commentator Tiru. Vi. Kaliyāṇa Cuntaraṇār.
- 12 “Love,” *kātāl*.
- 13 “Discipline,” *pāṇku*, lit. “side,” “part”; following the commentator. “Love,” *anpurukātāl*.
- 14 “Servants to the Lord,” *aṭiyār*; “meditation,” *uṇarvu*, lit. “consciousness.”
- 15 “Disciplined life,” *pāṇkuṭaiya neṛi*.
- 16 “Holy servant,” *tiruttonṭar*.
- 17 “Lord who revealed the Vedas,” *vētaṅkaḷ molinta pirāṇ*; “true devotee,” *meyttonṭar*; “servant to the Lord,” *nāṭaṇ taṇ aṭiyār*.
- 18 “Goddess who sits atop the beautiful lotus,” *veṇimalarmēl tiruṇaiyār*, a reference to Lakṣmī; “curry,” *kari amutu*; “servant,” *aṭiyār*.
- 19 “Husband,” *illāḷaṇ*, lit. “the man who has a wife,” it seems that Cēkkiḷār coined this term, but it did not become one that was used. “Discomfort,” *allal*; “servant,” *aṭiyār*.
- 20 “Holy servant,” *tiruttonṭar*.
- 21 “Modest,” *karpuṭaiya*.

- 22 “Grace,” *aruḷ*.
- 23 “Sheltered lady,” *maṭavār*; the term has associations of ignorance, simplicity, and credulity, which have to do with lack of experience with the outside world. “Modesty,” *karpu*.
- 24 “Principled lady,” *cīlattār*, lit. “good conduct,” “morality,” “Meditate,” *maṇattu ura vaṇaṇki*, lit., “worship in the mind.”
- 25 “He did not believe,” *teḷiyan*, lit., “he was not clear minded.” From the actions that come next in the story, I understand this to be a matter of him not believing her; if it was simply a matter of him trying to understand then he would have asked questions to clarify what she said. “Goddess who sits on the fragrant lotus,” *vācamalarttiruṇaiyār*, referring to Lakṣmī.
- 26 With this verse, Cēkkiḷār switches to six-foot lines in the *viruttam* meter, returning to the four-line format in the final two verses of her story. “Mind became perplexed,” *taṭumāru eyti*, lit. “experienced disorder.” “Local deity,” *vēru ōr aṇaṅku*; a goddess who is capricious; I discuss the term *aṇaṅku* in Chapters 3 and 4. “Interaction,” *toṭarvu*, “relationship,” “association.”
- 27 His destination is understood to be in Pāṇṭiyanāṭu; see v. 40.
- 28 He perceives his new wife as like Lakṣmī, *tiruvīṇālai*, while his former wife is like a capricious local goddess, *aṇaṅku aṇāl*.
- 29 “Auspicious ceremonies,” *maṅkalam*; “deity sacred to the family,” *teyvāt toḷukulam*.
- 30 “Faithfully,” *karpiṇōṭu*; “virtuous,” *aram*.
- 31 “Local goddess-like lady,” *aṇaṅkaṇār*.
- 32 “Lakṣmī,” *tiru*.
- 33 “Sacred land of pure Tamil,” *cen tamilt tiruṇāṭu*.
- 34 “Grace,” *aruḷ*.
- 35 “Good and great goddess,” *nal perun teyvam*.
- 36 “Meditated,” *pōrric cintai*, lit. “mentally praised”; “singular focus,” *oṇṇiya nōkkil*; “great knowledge,” *mikka uṇarvu*. In the Pondicherry edition, Kārāvelāne offers the intriguing translation, “great understanding through the union of vision and mind” (*cintai oṇṇiya nōkkil mikka uṇarvukoṇṭu*); at this point in the narrative, Cēkkiḷār does not tend to wrap meaning across distinctive lines of meter, though he does so increasingly as the text continues.
- 37 “Sack of flesh,” *tacaip poti*; “the form of the ghouls who worship your sacred feet in that place,” *āṅku niṇ tālkaḷ pōrrum pēy vaṭivu*. “Me, your servant,” *aṭiyēṇukku*.
- 38 “Fully realized the spiritual path,” *mēl neṇi uṇarvu kūra*, lit., “having abundant knowledge of the higher path”; “body of bones,” *eṇpu uṭampu*; “ghoul,” *pēy*.
- 39 “United with the divine wisdom that had arisen within her,” *eḷūnta ṇāṇattu orumaiyin*; “Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder,” *arputat tiruvantāti*; Umai is Tamil for Sanskrit Umā; “lovingly sang,” *nayattu pāṭi*.
- 40 “Profound insight,” *pēruṇarvu*; “Double Garland of Linked Verses,” *iraṭṭai mālai antāti*; Kailai is Tamil for Kailāsa; “difficult pilgrimage,” *kūra vaḷipaṭum vaḷi*.
- 41 “Leader of the Gods,” *aṇṭar nāyakaṇār*; “truth,” *vāymai*; “throngs of people,” *eṇṭicai mākkal*, lit. “people in all eight directions.”
- 42 “In a flash,” *maṇattinūm kaṭitu cenru*, lit. “swifter than thought”; “hindrance of her legs,” *kālīṇ taṭaiyiṇai*. Walking “on her head,” a detail that Cēkkiḷār borrows from Nampī Aṇṭār Nampī’s earlier hymn and is depicted in the diorama at Tiruvālāṅkāṭu as the saint walking on her hands, can be interpreted in several ways: She does not want to defile holy ground with her feet; she adopts an extreme path of ritualized hardship in her ascent of the Lord’s mountain home; she turns her “self” upside down, negating her ego.
- 43 “Love,” *aṇpu*; Caṇkaraṇ is Tamil for Sanskrit Śaṅkara; “vine of Himālaya,” *imaya valli*, a reference to Pārvaṭī, who is known from mythology as the daughter of king Himālaya. It is considered beautiful to compare a woman to a sinuous vine, see also v. 40.

- 44 Ampikai, Tamil for Sanskrit Ambikā; “heart was amazed and moved,” *tiruvuḷḷittin aticiyattu aruḷit tālntu*; “love,” *anpu*.
- 45 “Mother,” *ammai*; “cherishes us like a mother”; I have borrowed the translation of this phrase from McGlashan (2006, 161).
- 46 “White shells,” *caika veṇ*, often referring to conch shells; surely Cēkkiḷār’s euphemism for the white skulls the poet frequently describes in her poetry.
- 47 She uses informal forms of “you” in her address. “Love,” *anpu*.
- 48 “Bliss,” *ānantam*; Cēkkiḷār’s use of this term evokes the Lord’s Dance of Bliss. The poet herself used the term *civakati*, “the bliss of Śiva” (“Decade-1” v. 11). The description of the place, *nīṭuvāl paḷaṇa mūtūr nilaviya ālaṅkāṭṭil*, can be translated in many ways besides the way I have rendered it, e.g., “in the banyan tree forest that extends to the ancient town that is fertile and famous”; “in the banyan tree forest that extends to the ancient town of Paḷaṇam [*Paḷaṇamūtūr*, perhaps evoking the name, Paḷayaṇūr, “ancient town”], which is famous.” Whether the terms are descriptive or proper names is the significant issue. Kāraṇēlāne does not use proper names in translating this verse.
- 49 Cēkkiḷār partially quotes the poet’s “Decade-1” twice in this verse. In the first instance, he quotes from verse four. The poet says *eṭutta pātam aṇṭam ura nimirnta āṭum*, “dance in which the foot is lifted straight to the heavens”; her biographer says *aṇṭam ura nimirnta āṭukiṇṇa*, “his dancing with a straightness that touches the heavens.” The biographer leaves out the detail of the foot, which introduces an ambiguity, for the Lord’s body is also straight as he whirls in his dance. Given the accomplishment of Cēkkiḷār’s verse, I consider the omission to be significant and not simply an issue of meter. In the second instance, he quotes the first two words of her verse one, *koṅkai tiraṅki*, “withered breasts.” “Sang initial good verses,” *mūṭa nal patikam pāṭi*; “lord who is without beginning,” following commentator Tiru. Vi. Ka.; “loved by those on earth,” *ñālam katalittu*; “beauty,” *kōlam*, can also mean “form.”
- 50 “Great love,” *mika peruṇ katal*; “desire,” *iṭṭam*; “admiration,” *viyappu*; “sacred verses,” *tiruppatikam*. Cēkkiḷār partially quotes the poet’s “Decade-2” verse one twice in this verse. In the first instance, he mentions the first three words of her first verse, *eṭṭi, ilavam*, and *mikai*, which are thorny shrubs. As I discuss in [Chapter 4](#), he does not indicate that these are characteristics of the cremation ground as the poet describes. In the second instance, he quotes from the conclusion of that same verse, but revealingly leaves out the poet’s reference to Śiva’s dwarfish host (*kūḷi*) (see [Chapter 4](#)).
- 51 Notably, Cēkkiḷār leaves the issue of which *tāṇṭava* ambiguous. This verse concludes the essential story. Cēkkiḷār cleverly ends the story on the word *ammā*, which could mean “mother” but here means “talent” with an adverbial marker. The text thus ends with a word that is a homonym with mother. The final verse is transitional: 66. After celebrating the flowered, luminous feet of the saint who sings before the one who has neither beginning nor end while he dances the sacred dance, I will tell of the pious service of the sage of the traditional arts, Appūtiyār, who hails from Tinkalūr, which is ringed with fresh water rivers.

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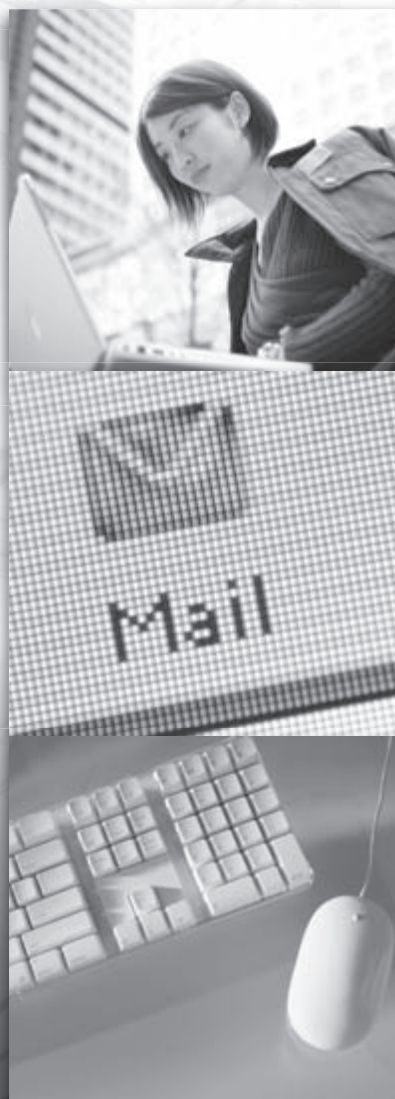
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